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Wait To Visit

VOLUME 21
ISSUE 6

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WILD AND WONDERFUL

Scotland

KEEP WALKING

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Discovery
MUSTANG VALLEY

The Rise of VIRTUAL TRAVEL

THE CHEF
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PERBACCO
ITALIAN TONIGHT?

HAUTE HOMESTAY
AYISHA MANZIL

BOOK OF THE MONTH
A SHORT HISTORY OF HUMANITY

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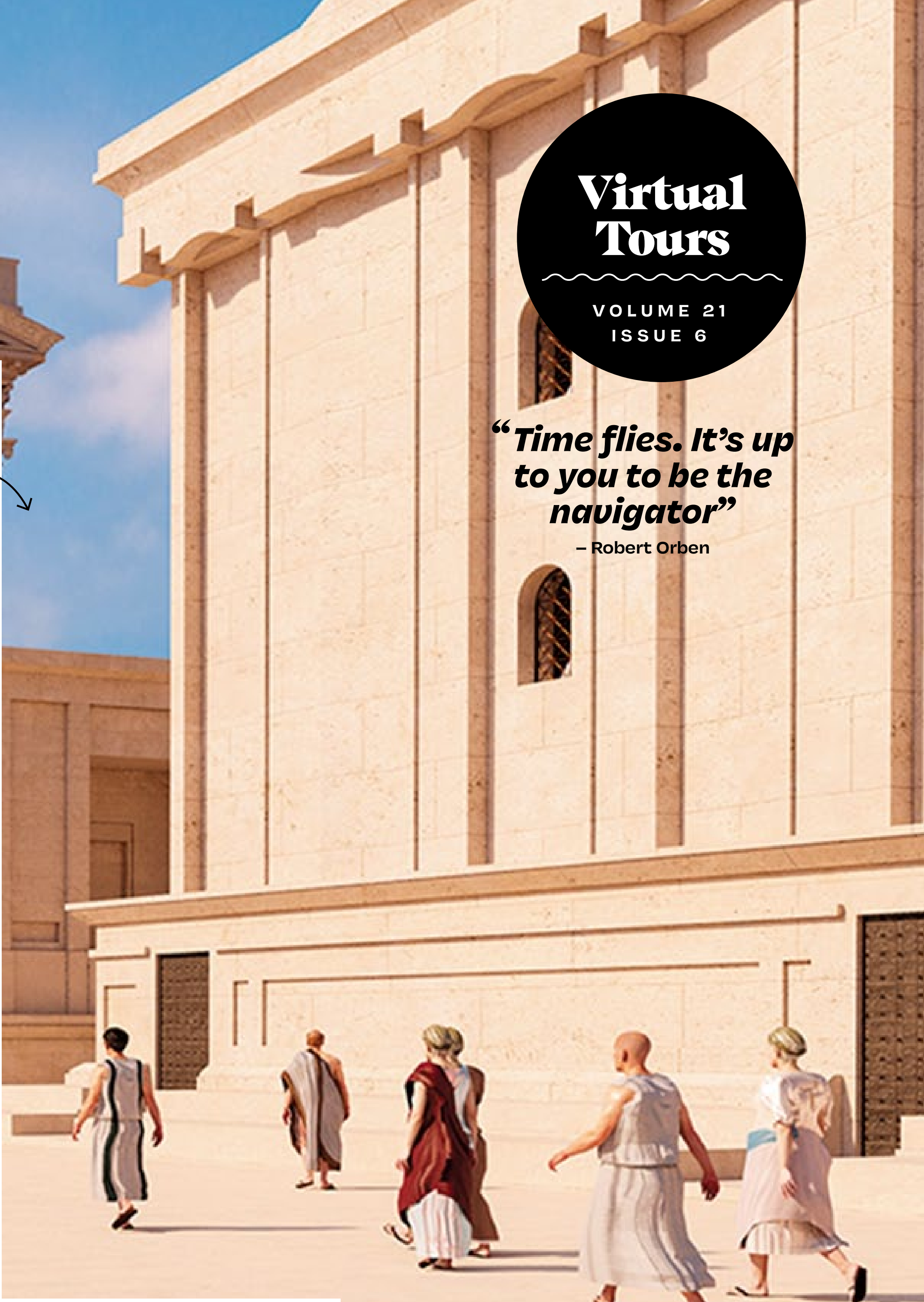

Virtual Tours

VOLUME 21
ISSUE 6

> *“Time flies. It’s up to you to be the navigator”*
>
> – Robert Orben

explore

18 The List
Wander and discover worldly gems through VR experiences

28 Arunachal Pradesh
Prannay Pathak
Off to the dawn-lit mountains

38 Nepal
Pallavi Pasricha
Traversing along the Mustang Valley, tracing the Thakali trail

Make a pit stop for the Mustang coffee made with raski, the Nepali rice wine ***38***

46 Taxila
Sunita Dwivedi
In search of Buddhist heritage in Gandhara

52 Scotland
Manjula Kalliat
Walking one of Scotland’s most iconic trails

radar

12 OUR MAN IN EUROPE Sweden’s natural bounty in bite-sized pieces

13 INSTA TRAVEL Our pick of India’s diverse terrains

Cover photograph: SHUTTERSTOCK

june

stay

64 THE PLAZA HOTEL Reliving the quintessential New York City summer

67 AYISHA MANZIL This colonial style bungalow (*pic above*) is the perfect holiday home in Kerala

eat

60 PERBACCO Sampling the best of Italian food at The Lodhi in New Delhi

62 INTERVIEW Alka Jena's transformation to a culinary custodian

63 MEAL OF THE MONTH Savya Rasa

back

70 BOOKS

74 TIME TRAVELLER

G-Shock's latest watch is wildlife inspired ***73***

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The Night is Darkest...

> One cannot overemphasise the need to exercise caution in the face of newer, more deadly strains—for everyone's sake

Surrounded on every side by tragedy—and which has managed to touch each of us in some way—it's not easy to talk about travel these days. At least, not without rubbing someone the wrong way or, worse, having one's head bitten off. And, yet, I see faint glimmers of hope on the horizon. The rise of virtual travel, for one—which we're reporting on in this issue—gives us something to cheer about. It's safe, supports small businesses and operators, and keeps boredom at bay and our appetites whetted, while we wait. Even though it's not the real thing, it'll do for now. Life, as Michael Crichton so memorably put it in *Jurassic Park*, "will find a way".

Of course, even as things open up slowly, one cannot overemphasise the need to exercise caution in the face of newer, more deadly strains—for everyone's sake. Hopefully, with the vaccination programme picking up speed, our helplessly interlinked and interdependent world will soon be a safer place again.

We're also marking a very quiet 20th anniversary this issue. Frankly, I'm a bit incredulous—at our ability to survive through thick and thin, to weather every storm. And, believe me, we've seen it all—from 9/11 to the 2004 tsunami, the global meltdown, sundry infectious diseases that felled various parts of the world at various points and then, of course, you know what. That's the thing about humanity (and *OT*). We're resilient.

The issue has some special stories. There's a road journey—we'd like to say 'bone rattling' but the roads are too damn excellent for that—through Arunachal Pradesh. There's a long walk on one of the most scenic paths in Scotland. There's a foodie's trail through Nepal's remote Mustang valley.

And happy anniversary to us.

Amit Dixit **@omitdixit**

AS SEEN ON THE DURRELLS IN CORFU
MASTERPIECE
MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANIMALS
GERALD DURRELL

CROSSED OFF MY READING LIST

My Family And Other Animals
Gerald Durrell

There's no greater joy than rereading a favourite classic. This one is about the budding zoologist's years in Corfu

UP NEXT
Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal
J.R. Ackerley

3 things I did this month

↓ Got my first dose of Covishield. It was important. Yay!

↑ Trawled through old pics and found this Air Tractor from the Bahrain Air Show

ENTERPRISE
SEASON ONE

← Started watching *Star Trek: Enterprise*. Just an old show to cheer you up

And here's what I ate

A veritable Bengali feast featuring *pabdar jhaal* and *shukto* on a recent trip to Kolkata. This is at Aaheli, one of my favourite joints

On the web

Travel with us real-time on
outlooktraveller.com

Colour Code

5 reasons to watch David Attenborough's *Life in Colour*

1 Colour Pop
The natural colours on the show are taken several notches up and take you on a colourful journey.

2 Visual Literacy
The show employs special cameras that can capture nature in UV and polarised light.

3 Nostalgia
Revisiting Attenborough's classic style with contemporary analysis of natural phenomena.

4 Curiosity
The show answers some of the most commonly asked questions about animals and their appearances.

5 Comfort Watch
Attenborough's latest is information rich and a guilt free watch, a relief during the current scenario.

Secrets of Stoke Park

5 things to know about UK's first country club, now Reliance owned

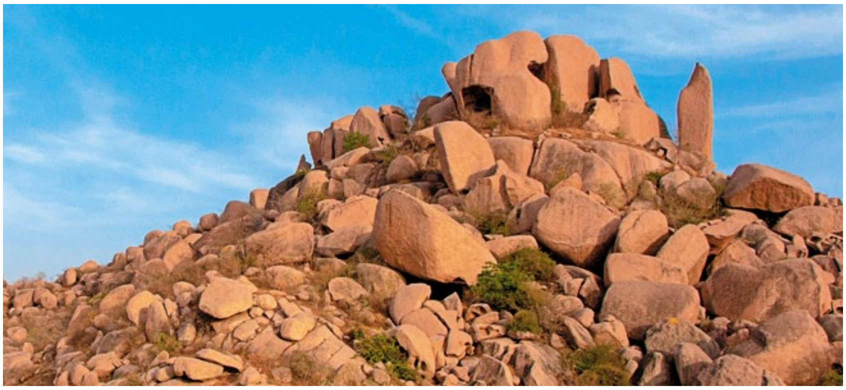
1 In the Cinemas
The property can be seen in several iconic movies such as *Goldfinger*, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, etc.

2 Oldest Country Club
It became Britain's first country club in 1908, after being leased from Mrs Wilberforce Bryant.

3 Sporting Matters
The estate's owner—Pa Jackson—successfully established Stoke Park into a sport hub, visited by the likes of Novak Djokovic.

4 Temporary Goal
It was at the Manor House here that Stuart King Charles I was briefly held as a prisoner.

5 Creative Life
The park sparked creativity for many, such as the English poet Thomas Gray, child prodigy artist Sir Edwin Landseer, among others.



Adrenaline Rush

Moving over the natural formations and rocky terrains of Pavagadh and Taranga in Gujarat, those looking for a peaceful climb have discovered Idar as a rock-climbing haven. Untouched by an influx of tourists, Idar is encompassed by the Aravalli range and lies approximately 100kms from Ahmedabad. Boasting of unique rock formations, it is also home to age-old temples that carpet its hilltops, lush hillocks and dense forests and is a huge magnet for birders and botanical and wildlife buffs.

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HERE, THERE, NOW & SOON

ABU DHABI IS OPENING UP 10

•

THE TRIANGLE POSE BECKONS 11

•

JOYS OF A SWEDISH PICNIC 12

THE DOORS OF Perception

Virtual reality is bringing the world closer to you—and it's Covid-safe to boot

☒ **HOME/THE WORLD**

It looks like the return of Covid will ensure that one more thing is here to stay: virtual reality tours. A case of win-win all round? You can travel the world from the comfort—and, importantly, safety—of your own home. And with technology getting better by the day—we're talking cutting-edge virtual reality headsets—it's almost like the real thing. But you *will* need to make that initial investment in some expensive tech to start with. Experts also opine that virtual travel merely whets your appetite, preparing you for real-world tourism when it opens up in earnest. During the pandemic, many travel companies have adapted, offering digital guided trips to anyone with an internet connection. Even Amazon has added Amazon Explore to its services, which offers everything from walking tours to cooking classes. Virtually, of course. Meanwhile, Airbnb's Experiences concept has migrated to a virtual platform. Everything from the great pyramids of Egypt to the penguin colonies of Antarctica is on offer, and you don't always need a VR headset to partake. It's a brave new world.

» **Turn to p. 18 for our list of some pretty cool virtual tours from around the world**

SECTION PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

THE EMIRATE RETURNS

Abu Dhabi

The Emirate of Abu Dhabi is lifting its mandatory quarantine protocol for international travellers. Starting from July 1, international travellers coming to Abu Dhabi will not have to quarantine themselves, including those from the USA. "It will be similar to the Dubai system—the PCR protocol will be different from high-risk to low-risk destinations," said His Excellency Ali Al Shaiba, executive director of Tourism and Marketing, DCT Abu Dhabi, "Quarantine will not be an option. We are announcing an extended green list—this green list will cover a majority of the markets that we are tapping into [including India]."

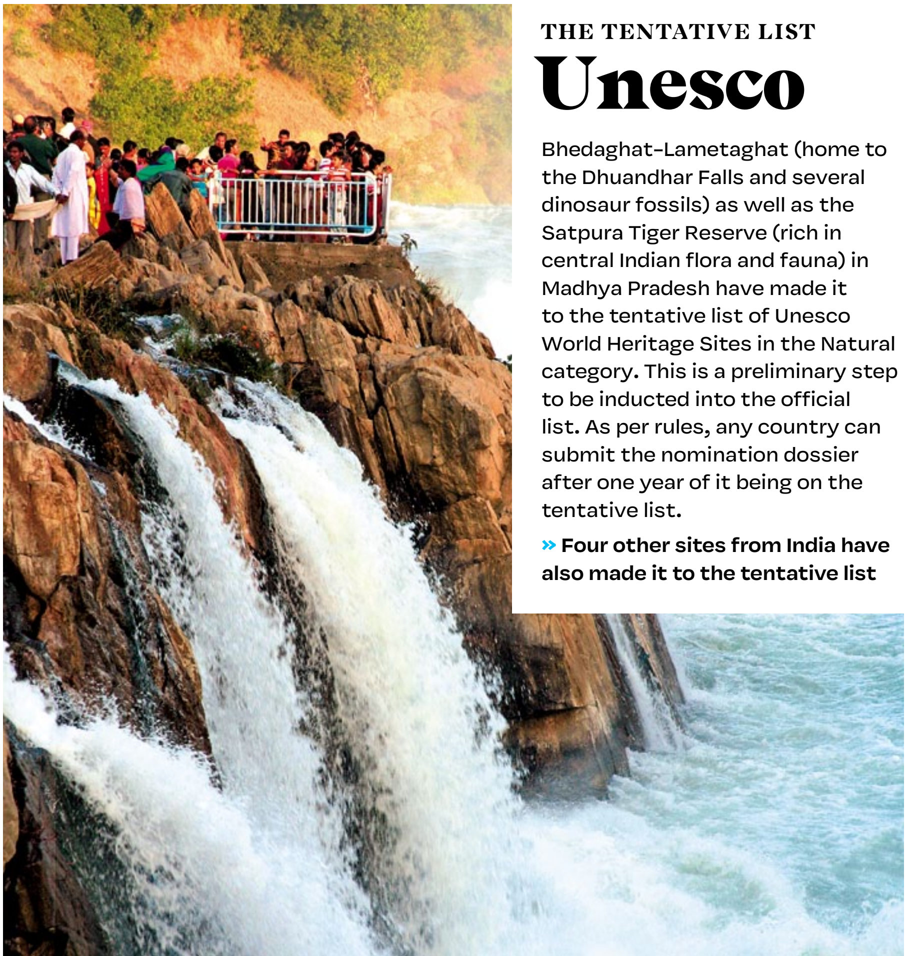
» They also plan to make it easier for tourists to travel between Dubai and Abu Dhabi

#45 Bapu Dandi March...

'Appy Days

This year, on International Museum Day—May 18—the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), New Delhi, launched its first-ever audio-visual guide app. The app makes it possible for museum viewers to listen to stories and anecdotes on their smartphones of several treasured modern Indian artworks displayed at the museum anywhere at any time. The museum tours on the app incorporate a rich mix of audio-visual content.

» The NGMA app is free for all users, and available on both Google Play and the Apple App Store



THE TENTATIVE LIST

Unesco

Bhedaghat-Lametaghat (home to the Dhuandhar Falls and several dinosaur fossils) as well as the Satpura Tiger Reserve (rich in central Indian flora and fauna) in Madhya Pradesh have made it to the tentative list of Unesco World Heritage Sites in the Natural category. This is a preliminary step to be inducted into the official list. As per rules, any country can submit the nomination dossier after one year of it being on the tentative list.

» Four other sites from India have also made it to the tentative list

Trikonasana

Triangle Pose

The name of this pose is derived from two words, *trikona* meaning triangle and *asana* meaning posture. In the final position, the body's posture resembles a triangle, hence the name. The pose is great for strengthening the joints and stretching the muscles of the body. Apart from that it stimulates the abdominal organs, relieves stress and improves digestion.

Take A Holistic Approach to Fitness

Many have the wrong idea about fitness. To be fit does not mean to take a whole lot of supplements and do rigorous exercise daily. In order to be fit, one needs to have a calm mind. Exercises tone your figure and boost your stamina, but a body becomes healthy when one follows a good diet. One should always follow a diet chart specified by a good nutritionist as each one of us has different body requirements. Any sort of exercise will work only when you follow a diet plan, otherwise your body requirement won't get fulfilled.

—An eminent fitness trainer and nutritionist, **Hasti Singh** is the founder of **Hasti Transformation**

Steps to master Trikonasana

1. Stand upright keeping the head and spine straight and feet together. The hands should be to the side of the body. Take deep breaths.

2. Move the legs 3-4 feet apart. Raise both arms straight out to the sides, in line with the shoulders and parallel to the floor with your palms facing downward.

3. Move the right foot to the outside direction. Turn the left foot slightly to the inward direction. Keep your knees straight throughout.

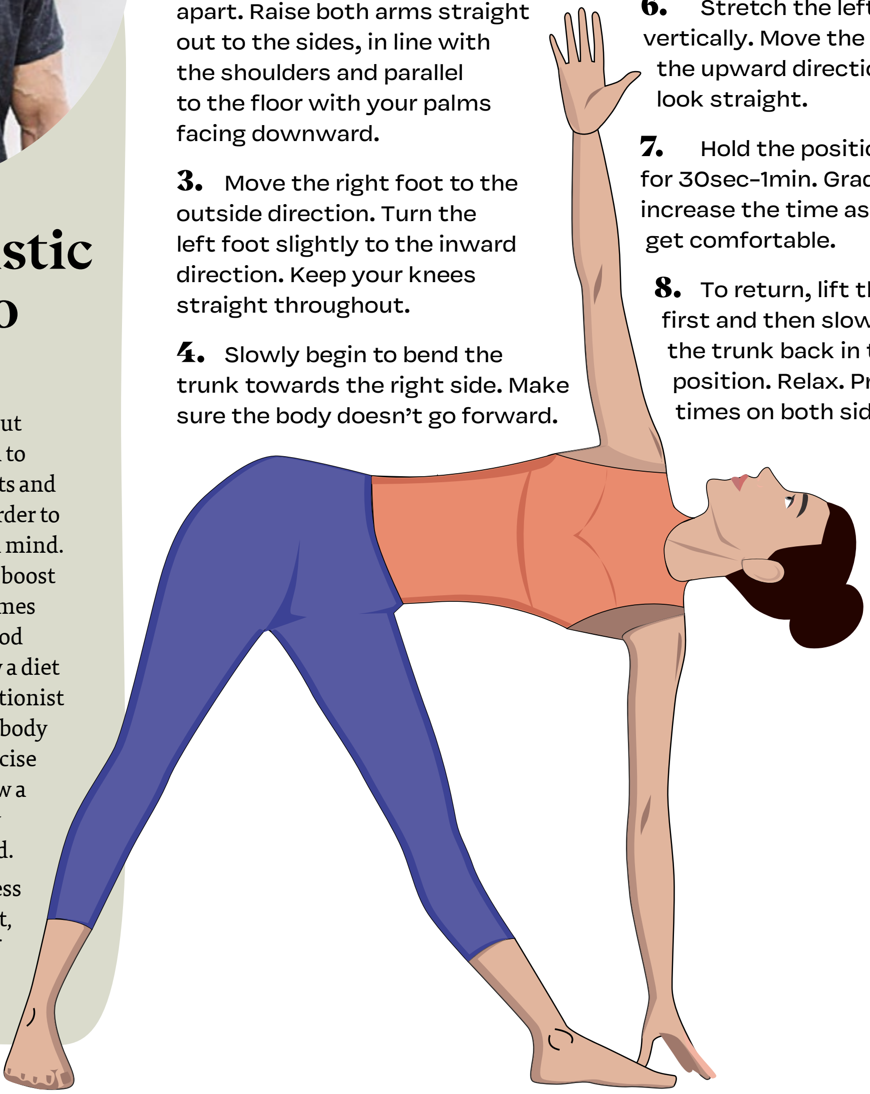
4. Slowly begin to bend the trunk towards the right side. Make sure the body doesn't go forward.

5. Once the trunk is completely bent, the hand must be close to the right ankle with the fingers slightly touching the floor. Ideally the right palm rests on the floor but avoid forcing this position.

6. Stretch the left arm vertically. Move the head in the upward direction and look straight.

7. Hold the position for 30sec-1min. Gradually increase the time as you get comfortable.

8. To return, lift the arms first and then slowly move the trunk back in the upright position. Relax. Practice 1-3 times on both sides.



MAN IN EUROPE
12

NITIN CHAUDHARY

Waiting For The Sun

AS STRANGE AS IT MAY SOUND, summer has not arrived in Sweden yet. As I sit writing this piece, a weak sun flickers through the clouds. The weather hovers around seven degrees, and the wind makes it chillier. In Covid times, it's a double whammy. Not only could we not manage to travel to a warmer country during the winter, the opportunity to enjoy an entire summer season also seems lost.

We shouldn't complain much, for Sweden never imposed a formal lockdown. We can still go out, walk in the woods and sit in cosy cafés and sip hot chocolate when it gets too cold outside. Now that the days are longer, there's a strong urge to step out. So, despite the weather, I cover myself in a parka and go walking. My walks trace a familiar route that takes me through the city's walking street, before I veer off into one of the largest parks in the city—Slottsparken. Malmö, Sweden's third largest city, where I live was once the most fortified city of medieval times. The remnants of those times earmark the landscape, including Malmö Castle that sits on the edge of the park and gives it its name (*slott* is Swedish for castle).

A canal snakes through the park dividing it in two. On a sunny weekend, rare though it has been this year, one can spot several boats dotting the canal, their occupants paddling with a leisureliness earmarked for holidays. On the open lawns, families and friends gather for picnics. These picnics remind me of my childhood when my father would drive us to a green patch outside city limits where we would scout for a clean spot and my mother would unwrap the carefully packed food. The concept of picnics evaporated as I entered my teens and I looked back at them as things we only did as kids.

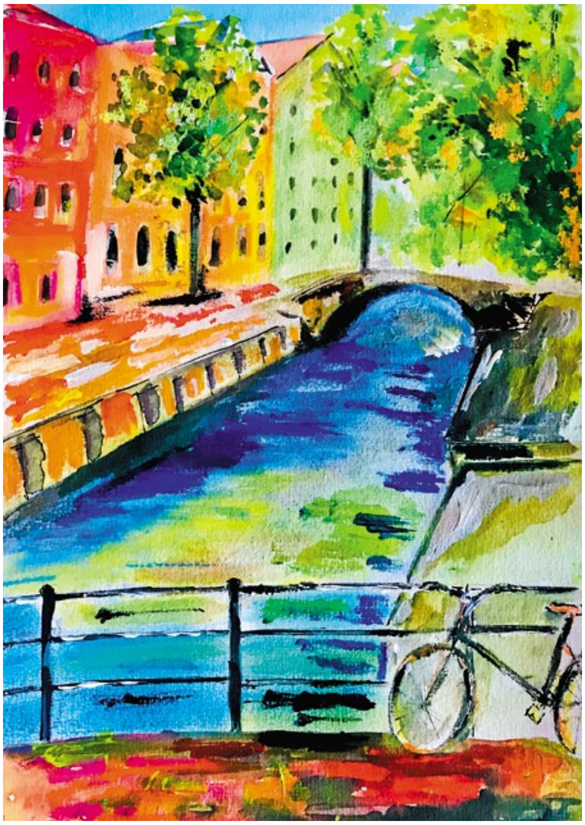
Here in Sweden though, picnicking outdoors in the summer is a national pastime enjoyed not only by families but also student groups and colleagues. As I walk through the park, I spot the groups sitting in the garden with their food spread out, while a portable music player plays in the background. There is mild cheer in the air, and a game of kubb is underway not far from the groups. Kubb (Viking chess to outsiders) is a lawn game where two teams aim to knock over wooden blocks called *kubbar* by throwing wooden batons at them. The game is won by the team that manages to knock over the *kubbars* of the other team and also a centrally placed king-pin. It's a game that all ages can play, which explains its popularity as a picnic sport.

> **Sweden never imposed a formal lockdown. We can still go out, walk in the woods and sit in cosy cafés and sip hot chocolate when it gets too cold outside**

Yet another popular picnic activity is slacklining. Slacklining is about balancing and walking on a soft and stretchy nylon-webbed wide strap (called a slackline) which is usually tied between two trees. This is a sport mostly reserved for the young.

I must confess that I have fallen for the idea of these picnics. Now I organise them with friends, packing our cucumber sandwiches and hot tea, not to mention the Kubb bag. These picnics provide relief—outside, away from large gatherings, we sit and talk in small groups, comforting ourselves that though we can't travel as often as we did earlier, we can still step out and enjoy nature in bite-sized pieces.

The only challenge left is the weather. So, here I sit praying that the next weekend is a sunny one!



↖ **On the way to Slottsparken**

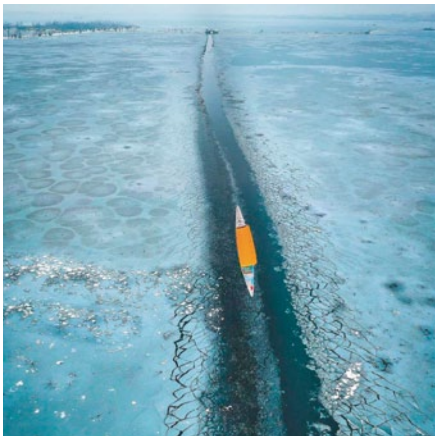
ILLUSTRATION: NITIN CHAUDHARY

HIMACHAL PRADESH Perspective makes all the difference

@meinbhiphotographer

KERALA Venturing to lands unknown; far and wide

@rj_tauras



SRINAGAR Streaming and screaming infinite possibilities

@ompsyram

MAHARASHTRA Greens, greys and monsoon haze

@iam_ali007

Terrain Tapestry

With landscapes as diverse as these, a traveller can never run out of options. Offering a glimpse into the spellbinding terrains across India, these visuals are pure eye candy

@sundar.k_

TAMIL NADU

Free flowing and how

LADAKH Another day, another adventure

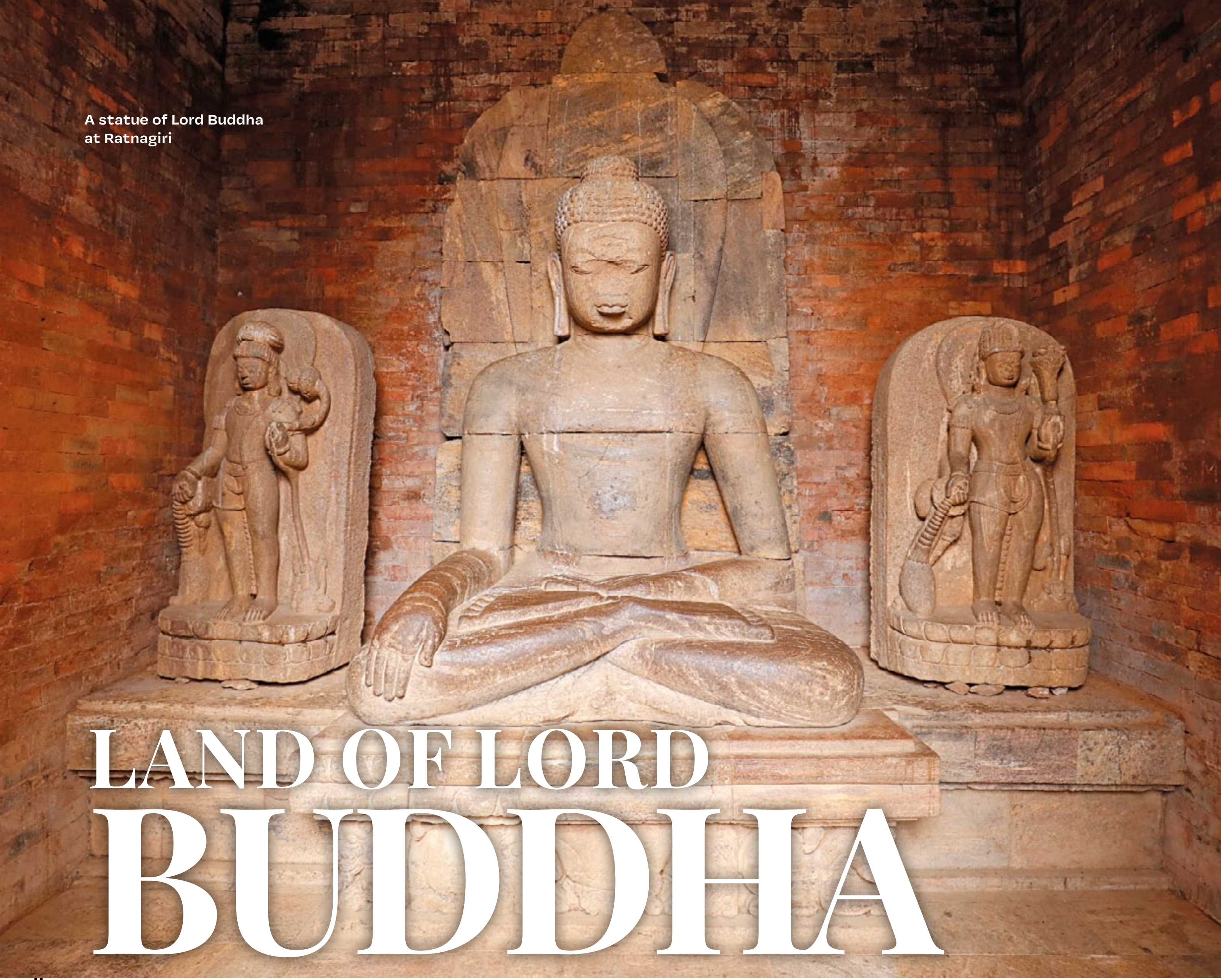
@karnavv

GOA A pop of yellow and a tinge of blue, Goa is all about you and your crew

@manish.chopdekar

HIMACHAL PRADESH Hanging by the cliff has a whole new meaning

@ritzy.rover


A statue of Lord Buddha at Ratnagiri

LAND OF LORD BUDDHA

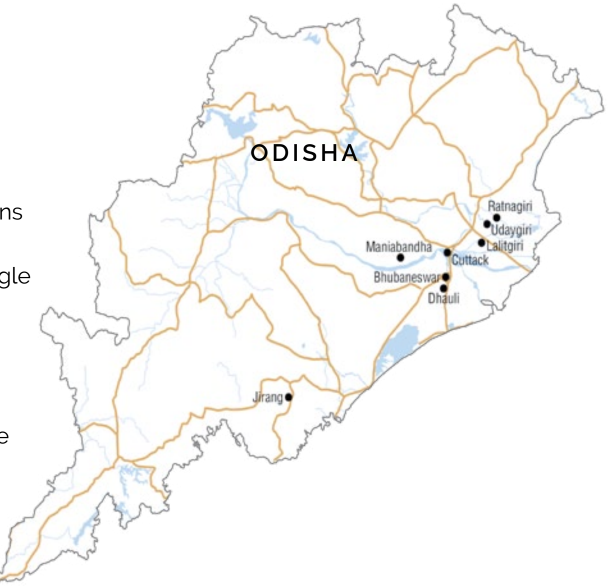
Odisha was once a major hub of Buddhism. The rich legacy left behind will take your breath away

The roots of Buddhism in Odisha are ancient as well as deep and it has played an integral role in shaping its religious history. Between the 8th and 10th century AD, when this region was ruled by the Bhauma-Kara dynasty, it was the State religion. The impact of Buddhism lasted in Odisha till the 15th century and today, it is home to more than 200 Buddhist sites.

The most important sites are Udaygiri, Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri. Together they comprise the Diamond Triangle of Buddhist circuit in Odisha. The sites belong to the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism—a Tantric form—also known as Thunderbolt Vehicle or Diamond Vehicle, hence the name.

Ratnagiri

A key site of the triad, Ratnagiri means 'hill of jewels'. It is the most well-excavated site of the Diamond Triangle and offers a peek into Odisha's rich Buddhist heritage. The site consists of a series of monasteries, temples, shrines, stupas and sculptures. According to some Tibetan texts, the Mahayana and Tantrayana sects of Buddhism originated here. This is the only monastery in India to have a curvilinear roof and the



ornately carved rooms take you back to the opulence of the past.

Lalitgiri

Lalitgiri lies between the valley of two rivers—Birupa and Chitrotpala—and is the oldest of the Diamond Triangle sites. In fact, the monastery, built in 1st century AD, is the oldest-known Buddhist monastery in the State. The majestic ruins of the main stupa atop a hill, the prayer halls and the numerous votive stupas amid lush green surroundings lend a magical feel to this ancient complex. A casket containing the sacred relics of Lord Buddha was unearthed here. The site houses an excellent museum.

Udaygiri

Located 20 kms from Cuttack in the district of Jajpur and nestled between the foothills of the Eastern Ghats, scenic Udaygiri (Hill of the Rising Sun) is one of the biggest Buddhist sites in the State. The monastery is divided into two parts—the Madhavpur Mahavihara and the Simhaprastha Mahavihara. While the former consists of a massive stupa, prayer hall, votive and commemorative stupas, the latter houses the ruins of monasteries, meditation chambers and some beautifully carved statues.

Dhauli

Set on the banks of Daya River, Dhauli or Dhauligiri has the rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka. Believed to be the battlefield of the Kalinga war that led to significant changes in Ashoka's beliefs, Dhauli went on to become a major Buddhist centre. One can see a number of stupas, chaityas and pillars throughout the site whose foundation was laid by Ashoka himself. Commemorating the end of the Kalinga war, the Shanti Stupa or 'Peace Pagoda' here has become a place of devotion for many pilgrims. One of the major highlights is Dhauli Kalinga Mahotsav—a three-day annual festival, featuring music, dance and martial art performances.

Clockwise from top: Buddhist remains at Udaygiri; the imposing Shanti Stupa at Dhauli; and the gate to Ratnagiri Monastery

Jirang

Often called the Little Tibet of Odisha, Jirang, nestled in the hills of Chandragiri is an ideal blend of nature and spirituality. It happens to be the largest Buddhist monastery in eastern India. Also known as Padmasambhava Mahavihara, the Jirang monastery is a comfortable five-hour drive from Bhubaneswar. The Tibetans call it 'Phuntsokling', or 'land of plenty and happiness'.

The beautiful Jirang Monastery

Maniabandha

Located in Cuttack, Maniabandha is one of the oldest "living Buddhist sites" in the country. Chinese traveller and scholar Hiuen Tsang's narration also mentions this Buddhist site when he visited India in 7th Century AD. Though there are five "living Buddha sites" in Cuttack, Maniabandha is famous for its centuries-old weaving activities. The site houses a temple built in the Kalingan style of architecture where Hindu deities are also worshipped alongside images of Lord Buddha.

The Buddhist legacy of Odisha is truly a treasure trove and deserves to be discovered by more travellers and heritage lovers.

For more information, visit odishatourism.gov.in

ODISHA
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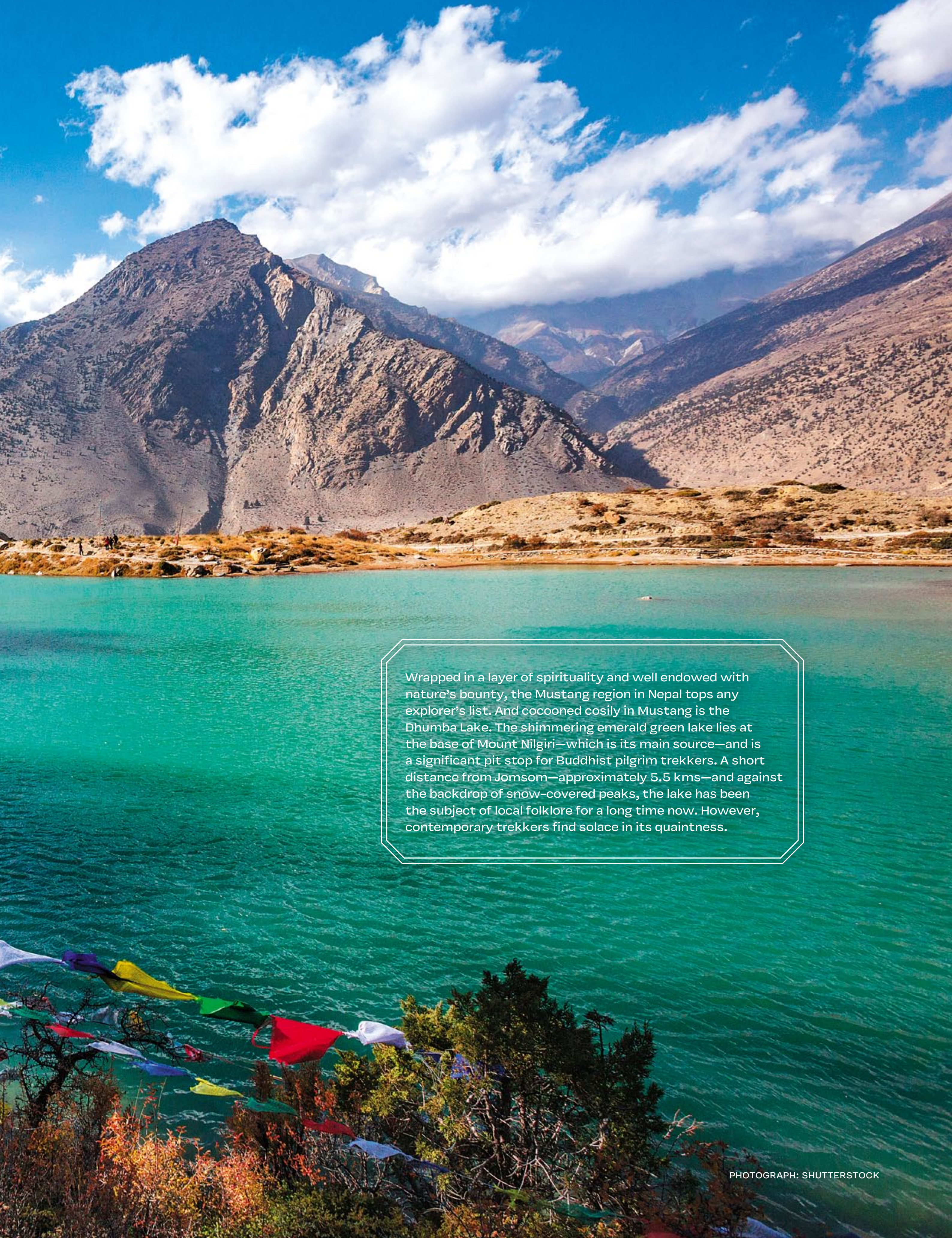
LIFE IS SHORT, AND THE WORLD IS WIDE

explore

ACROSS THE GLOBE...VIRTUALLY **18**
•
LAND OF DAWN-LIT MOUNTAINS **28**
•
ON THE THAKALI TRAIL **38**
•
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA **46**
•
WALKING THE WEST HIGHLAND WAY **52**

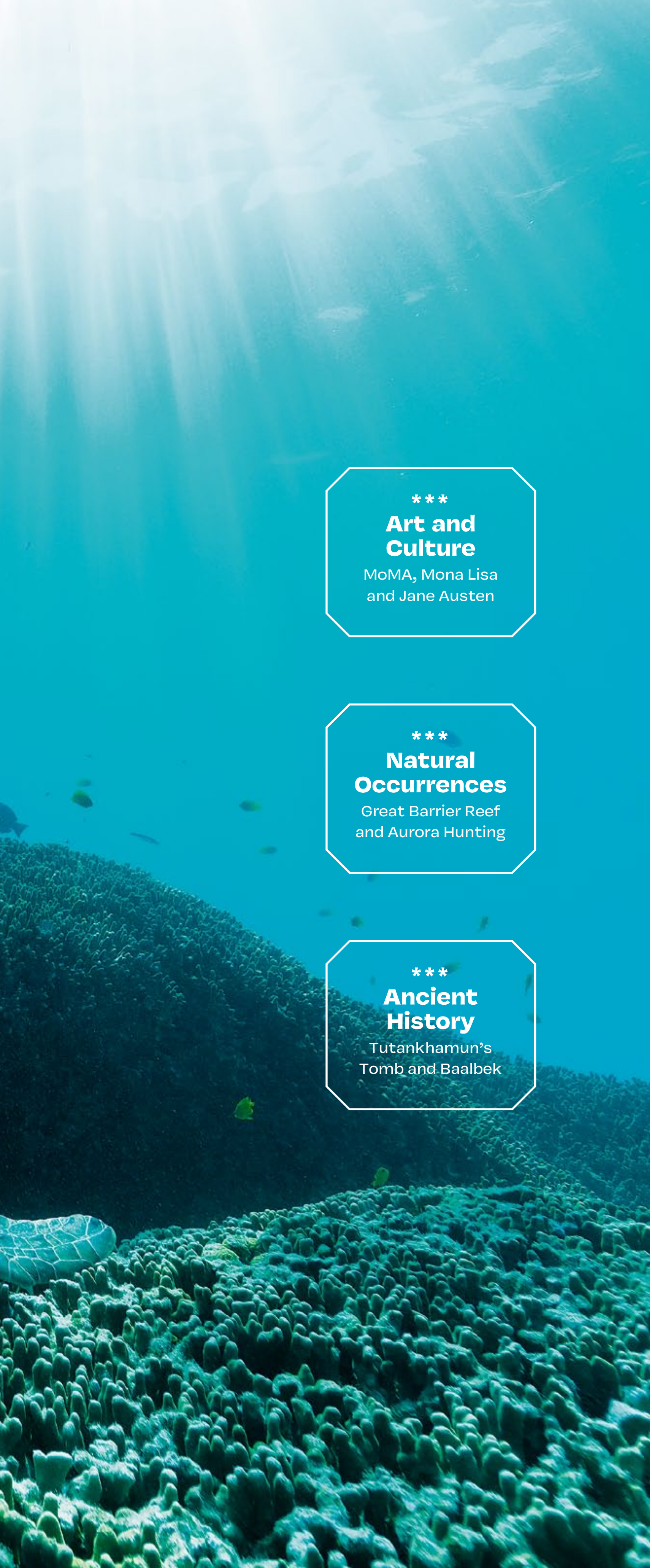


Wrapped in a layer of spirituality and well endowed with nature's bounty, the Mustang region in Nepal tops any explorer's list. And cocooned cosily in Mustang is the Dhumba Lake. The shimmering emerald green lake lies at the base of Mount Nilgiri—which is its main source—and is a significant pit stop for Buddhist pilgrim trekkers. A short distance from Jomsom—approximately 5.5 kms—and against the backdrop of snow-covered peaks, the lake has been the subject of local folklore for a long time now. However, contemporary trekkers find solace in its quaintness.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

AROUND THE WORLD... Virtually

As travel slows down marginally, attractions across the world come online. Here is Team OT's pick of the best virtual tours you can take this summer


* * *
Art and Culture
MoMA, Mona Lisa and Jane Austen
* * *
Natural Occurrences
Great Barrier Reef and Aurora Hunting
* * *
Ancient History
Tutankhamun's Tomb and Baalbek

*** The journey is carried out aboard the state-of-the-art research vessel, the *MV Alucia*, which also comes with a helicopter and two deep-sea submersibles. For the reef's exploration, Attenborough uses the Triton submersible, with a 360° view of the reef**

Inside the Great Barrier Reef

Witness life underwater unfold like a miracle

☒ THE TOUR IS AVAILABLE ON ATTENBOROUGHSREEF.COM

If life forms underwater have always piqued your interest, the corals have fascinated you and the Great Barrier Reef has been on your bucket list, then this virtual tour has been crafted for you. Following David Attenborough's lead, one can explore the most complex ecosystems on the planet right from the comfort of the couch. While the visuals are a real treat, viewers can also experience the underwater cacophony to understand this diverse ecosystem better. Specialist divers and reef experts take you beneath the waves and ensure that you experience this vivid world. With a series of engaging videos and text divided into chapters, the virtual tour is truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

» This 20-minute tour is guided by reef expert Professor Justin Marshall and David Attenborough

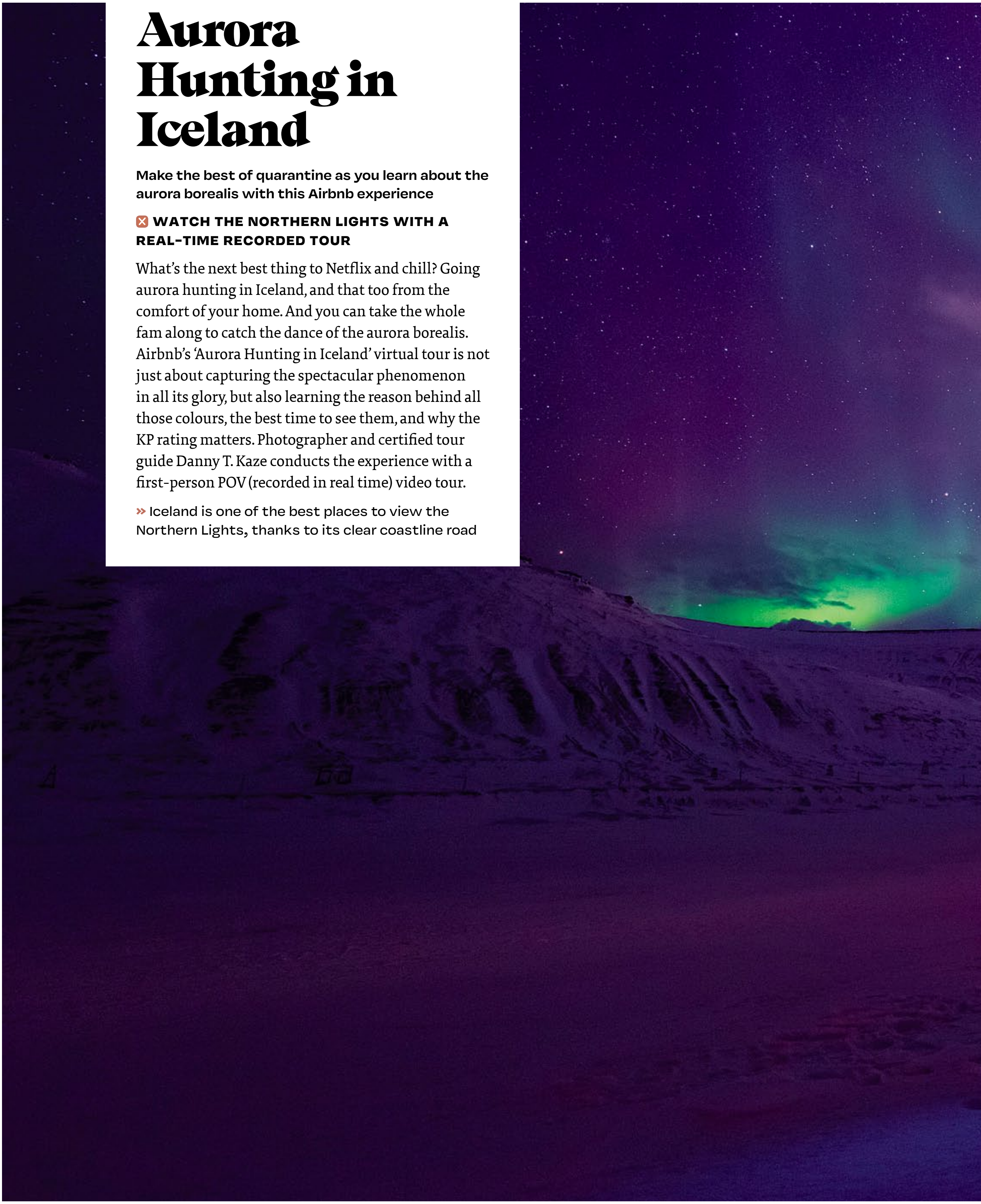
PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

Aurora Hunting in Iceland

Make the best of quarantine as you learn about the aurora borealis with this Airbnb experience

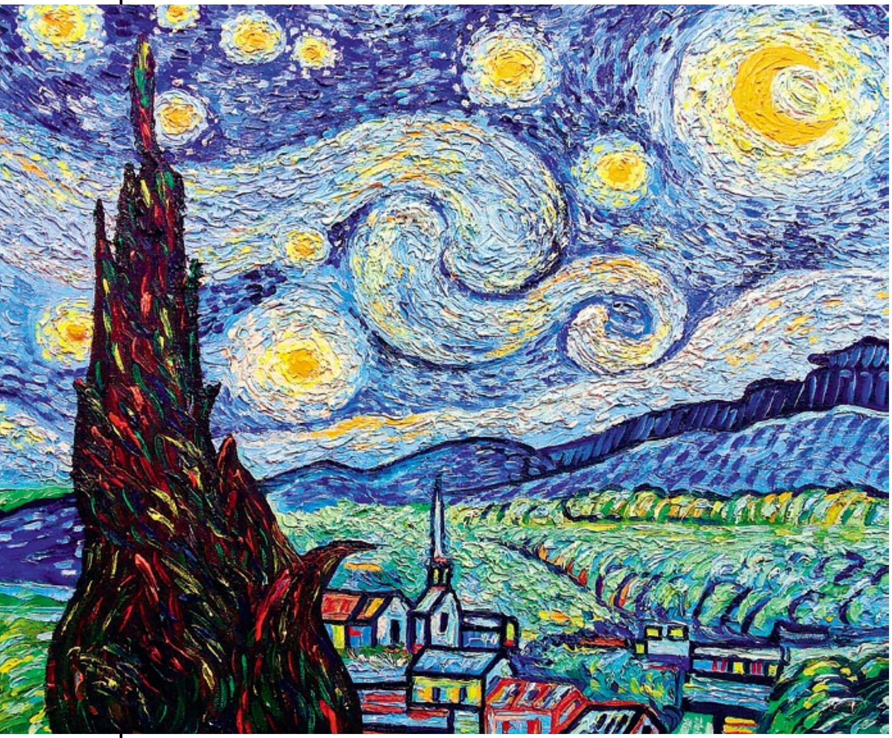
☒ WATCH THE NORTHERN LIGHTS WITH A REAL-TIME RECORDED TOUR

What's the next best thing to Netflix and chill? Going aurora hunting in Iceland, and that too from the comfort of your home. And you can take the whole fam along to catch the dance of the aurora borealis. Airbnb's 'Aurora Hunting in Iceland' virtual tour is not just about capturing the spectacular phenomenon in all its glory, but also learning the reason behind all those colours, the best time to see them, and why the KP rating matters. Photographer and certified tour guide Danny T. Kaze conducts the experience with a first-person POV (recorded in real time) video tour.



» Iceland is one of the best places to view the Northern Lights, thanks to its clear coastline road

There are all kinds of beliefs about the aurora. For instance, the North American Inuit believe that they're football players—spirits of the dead playing footie with walrus skulls. Indigenous Finno-Ugric Sami believe one shouldn't talk about the Northern Lights at all!



MoMA Artwork Tour

Walk the hallways of MoMA...from your couch

THE TOUR IS AVAILABLE ON GOOGLE ARTS AND CULTURE AND IS FREE OF COST

Considered the destination for witnessing *the* best of modern and contemporary art in the USA, the Museum of Modern Art holds a very significant position. Standing in all its glory since the 1920s, the museum takes visitors through the journey of a lifetime. While options may be many, where does one begin? And what does one not miss? This MoMA Artwork virtual tour is the answer. Taking the viewers through seven unmissable art pieces at the premises, the tour includes Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, Rousseau's *The Dream,* along with Lee Friedlander's *Philadelphia* and four other iconic art exhibits.

» MoMA's initial collection included eight gifted prints and one drawing

Discovering Tutankhamun's Tomb

Undertake a live guided tour of King Tut's tomb and uncover the many secrets surrounding his life and death

TUT'S TOMB IS LOCATED IN AN ANCIENT NECROPOLIS CALLED THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS

Stories about the life and death of the boy-king Tutankhamun abound in popular culture. His tomb and mummy have been subjected to all kinds of research, but if nothing has sated your curiosity about Tut, this online experience, conducted live using 360° reconstruction, is worth a try. Hosted by an Egyptologist-guide, the tour will take you to the tomb of the king who ascended the throne as a 10 year old and died at the age of 19, located in Luxor's Valley of the Kings. Called 'Discovering Tutankhamun's Tomb', the virtual guided tour also introduces one to the famous Gold Mask of Tut and his other treasures at the Cairo Museum.

» In keeping with the Ancient Egyptian belief in the afterlife, Tutankhamun was buried with a funerary treasure that contained a gold mask weighing 20 pounds, a cloak made of leopard skin, six chariots, 46 bows and 30 wine flasks

*** Tut's tomb was discovered in 1922 by Howard Carter. The British archaeologist separated the mummy from the base using a chisel, removed the head and broke almost all major joints in the body, all of which has been criticised heavily**

* The recorded history of the village of Chawton dates back to 1086. The royal manor house was paid over 40 visits by Henry III in the 13th century

Jane Austen's House Tour

Discover a room of Jane Austen's own, nay, her whole house through this acclaimed virtual tour

☒ THIS HOUSE IN HAMPSHIRE WAS WHERE THE NOVELIST SPENT THE FINAL DECADE OF HER LIFE

It should be a truth universally acknowledged that all Jane Austen lovers in lockdown must be in want of a virtual tour to the house where the 19th-century novelist published her six famous works. What, then? Do yourself a favour and sign up for a walk-through of the heritage property, at Chawton, Hampshire, where Austen spent the final decade of her life. The Grade 1 listed building and Museum is regarded as one of the world's most significant literary sites. Here lie jewellery owned by Austen, early editions of her works and the table at which she wrote them. Or go for the amusing Cat's-Eye Audio Tour where the museum cat shows you around the bakehouse, courtyard stone bench and the garden.

» Want to put the roof back over your favourite novelist's house? The Museum has an initiative called Save the Roof where you can sponsor a tile for ₹1,500 (£15)

Mount Everest Climb

Witness the magic of the climb unfold at home

☒ THE WORLD'S HIGHEST WEBCAM IS LOCATED HERE AT *KALA PATTHAR*

Ever thought of climbing the highest mountain in the world while sitting on your couch and not wrapped in layers of warm clothing? The Mount Everest Climb tour is exactly that. Lying in south Asia, on the border of Nepal and Tibet, the mountain has about a 4-metre snowcap. Right from how the mountain got its English name to the barriers that one might encounter while climbing it physically, this virtual tour has a lowdown of it all. The tour also shares a glimpse into the villages that climbers generally pass on the way along with the Khumbu Icefall—considered one of the most dangerous stages.

» The virtual tour is available on Google Arts and Culture for free

After Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first climbed the peak in 1953, over 4,000 people have followed in their footsteps.

* The physical expedition can take upto two months as climbers require time to acclimatise to the air (or lack thereof)

This eight-minute VR experience has been compiled by exhibition curators Louis Frank and Vincent Delieuvin after a decade of research.

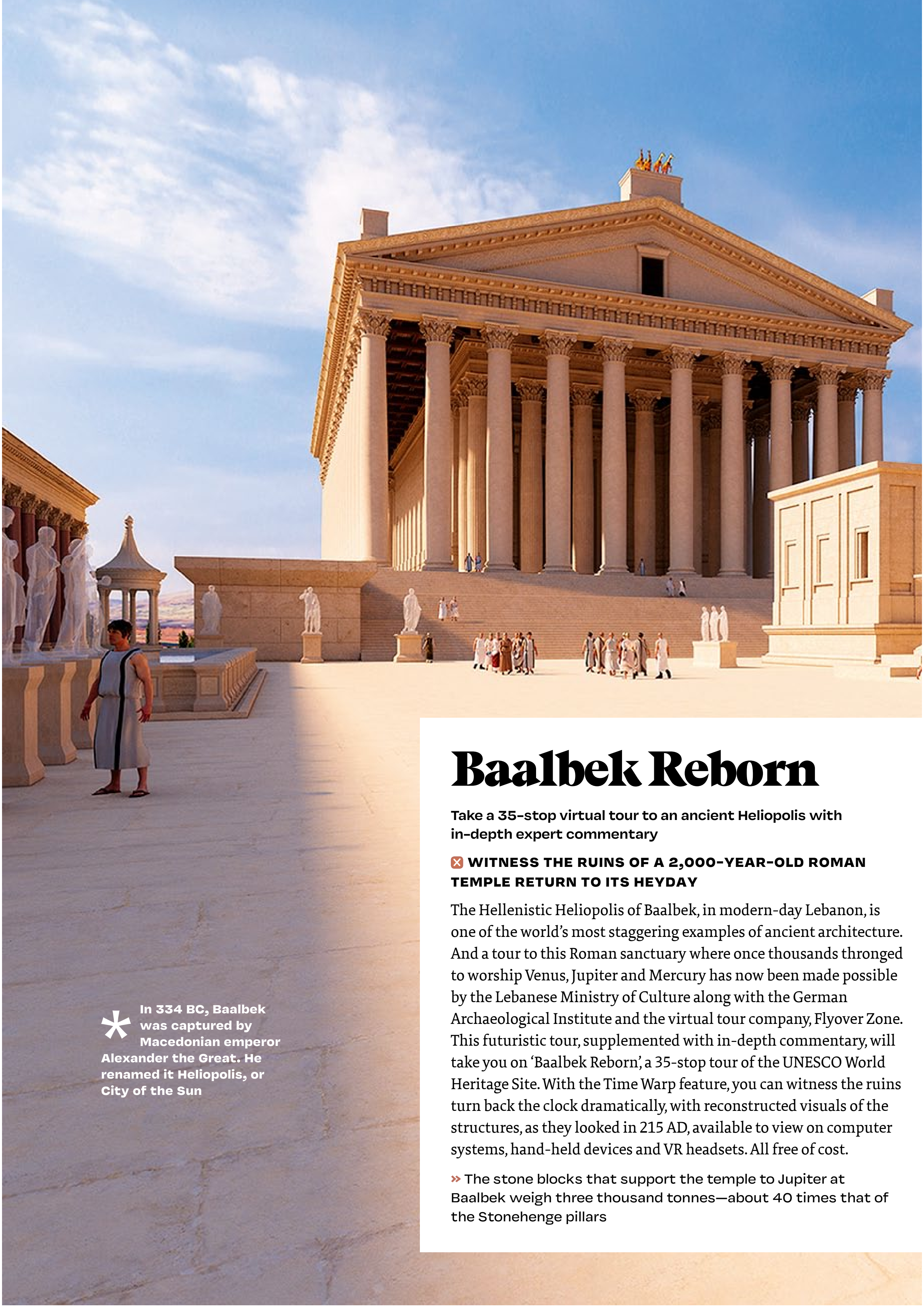
Mona Lisa: Beyond the Glass

Get up close and personal with da Vinci's masterpiece

THE VIDEO CAN BE WATCHED IN 360° VIDEO OR IN VR WITH A CARDBOARD VIEWER

Renowned for its magnificence, for years the *Mona Lisa* has captured the hearts of young and old alike. Considered one of the finest pieces of art, the best way to experience it is up close, personal and face to face. While that may not be possible physically, the Louvre's first virtual reality project—Mona Lisa: Beyond the Glass—ensures just that. This virtual tour aims at a barrier-free experience of da Vinci's finest work and uses the latest scientific research on the artist, his creative processes and his painting techniques. The tour takes viewers back in time, where Mona Lisa comes to life, talks about her outfit, hair, etc and tells the real story.

» This eight-minute VR experience was also a part of the Leonardo da Vinci exhibition in 2020 and is available to view on your smartphone



*In 334 BC, Baalbek was captured by Macedonian emperor Alexander the Great. He renamed it Heliopolis, or City of the Sun

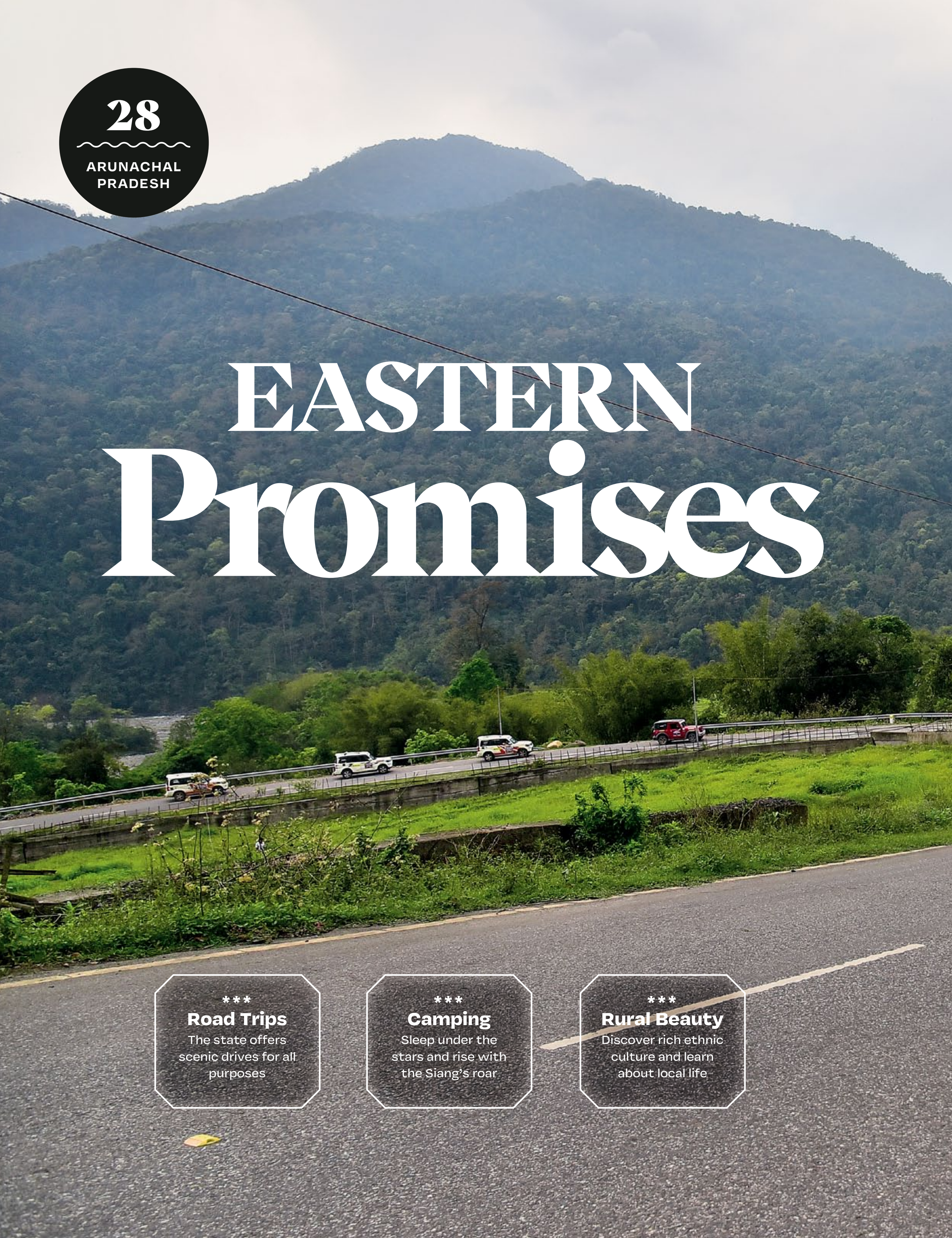
Baalbek Reborn

Take a 35-stop virtual tour to an ancient Heliopolis with in-depth expert commentary

☒ **WITNESS THE RUINS OF A 2,000-YEAR-OLD ROMAN TEMPLE RETURN TO ITS HEYDAY**

The Hellenistic Heliopolis of Baalbek, in modern-day Lebanon, is one of the world's most staggering examples of ancient architecture. And a tour to this Roman sanctuary where once thousands thronged to worship Venus, Jupiter and Mercury has now been made possible by the Lebanese Ministry of Culture along with the German Archaeological Institute and the virtual tour company, Flyover Zone. This futuristic tour, supplemented with in-depth commentary, will take you on 'Baalbek Reborn', a 35-stop tour of the UNESCO World Heritage Site. With the Time Warp feature, you can witness the ruins turn back the clock dramatically, with reconstructed visuals of the structures, as they looked in 215 AD, available to view on computer systems, hand-held devices and VR headsets. All free of cost.

» The stone blocks that support the temple to Jupiter at Baalbek weigh three thousand tonnes—about 40 times that of the Stonehenge pillars



28

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

EASTERN Promises

* * *

Road Trips

The state offers scenic drives for all purposes

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Sleep under the stars and rise with the Siang's roar

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PRANNAY PATHAK

discovered quite a few things about travel, as he zipped along the Trans-Arunachal Highway in central Arunachal

↖ **The Trans-Arunachal Drive convoy rolls out of Basar, Lepa Rada district**

ARUNACHAL TOURISM

I LOVE THE MEMORY TRIGGER that music provides. Because now whenever I play a Tedeschi Trucks track, it transports me to the sunny April day when I sat snug in the front seat of a Mahindra Thar, ferreting in my lousy backpack for a pair of sunglasses that I thought I'd lost. Everything else was fine—smooth like butter. Smooth like the road stretching before us, a road so pretty it still makes me dizzy. Of course, there would be the occasional slowing down on account of the calves and the goats. There would be a school named after Lord Macaulay and there would be a restaurant named after a certain Mister Chutia as we sped past glorious fields and busy settlements towards Gogamukh, Assam. I am instantly reminded of the way my throbbing heart vowed to return to this place having learned to drive.

THE Beginning

For ages, I have longed to go to Arunachal, that spectacular land of the dawn-lit mountains, that evocative coming together of fortuitous geographical bounty and rich biodiversity. Earlier this year, when the world around us hadn't finally started unravelling yet, I finally got my chance to drive through the length of the state from east to west, on the majestic, 2,500-km-long Trans-Arunachal Highway.

Except that I don't drive, or, to put it less self-effacingly: I don't know how to. Right—I put myself on the plane to Dibrugarh with the air of an otherwise accomplished man who in his eccentric greatness possesses one, or, even more fashionably, *two* incapabilities?

On the first day, we coasted through the gorgeous tea country of Dibrugarh, competed with the wind over the impossibly beautiful Bogibeel Bridge, and then took in the tropical serenity of Chapakhowa, on our way to Bomjir, our first stop, where we would join the rest of the convoy. It poured intermittently and the scenery would turn lush and the air cooler with each spell. Having driven past adorable-looking churches and quaint houses, we arrived at the campsite. It rained quite heavily and the mist spiralling around the Mishmi hills grew denser.

*** The Trans-Arunachal Highway is a modern, two-lane highway that stretches for roughly 2,500km from Tawang in the west to Kanubari in the east, taking travellers through some of the most pristine parts of the state without much traffic to contend with**

The drive would resume on the morrow, starting with the assigning of the vehicles. As no one would partner up with a non-driver, the keys kept disappearing as I tried to reconcile myself to the prospect of being bundled into a Scorpio (no offense to that quite-capable SUV) like a stowaway. That familiar, sinking feeling of being a stranger in an enchanting land got over me, quite like the turbulent torrents of the Dibang that had toppled a raft from this very party last night. I think the leaping river, its own bank ravaged by construction activity, saw my stoic face ready to burst with entreaty and decided to send help. The journalist-columnist Mitali Saran walked in after everybody had left and asked me to get my stuff.

The beautiful drive to Geku began. I took over DJ duties, and after a few misses with the Bluetooth connection, got the Rolling Stones and the Allman Brothers to get kicking. The convoy, led by rally legend Hari Singh, and Lhakpa Tsering, President, Motorsport Club of Arunachal, rolled, sweeping past the charming landscape dotted with thatch roofs and a crop of vegetation that, though expected, proved beguiling to me, a first-timer in these parts. The deep green fronds of the palms swayed joyously with the pre-monsoon wind.

When it comes to describing the brilliant driving conditions in Arunachal, where does one begin? I was only in the central part of the state and the road conditions seemed to only get better with each bend. As for the view, thick wisps of mist coiled amorously around the coy Mishmi hills veiled in a gossamer veil of blue. The Siang was a constant companion to the convoy, at some places ferocious and bubbling and at others, gentle, filling the valley like a silent benefactor. The roads stayed loyal even as we climbed up, first to sleepy Yingkiong and then to Geku, 40 kilometres later. We reached just before dusk and indulged ourselves with chai and pictures with eager locals at the circuit house.

The Geku campsite is also used for the Siang Rush, an exclusive annual event conceptualised to showcase the best of adventure tourism in Arunachal Pradesh.

SIANG Sleepover

The unspoilt serenity of the sandbar at Geku, a charming, hilly village, floored us. The high bank overlooks a full Siang here, which, though muddy, flows with vigour. It was here that we camped after witnessing a few cultural performances including the famous Tapu war dance. Before long, the mattresses were inflated, the windcheaters were fished out, and a bonfire was started. However, the wind rose and a storm soon crashed the party, blowing away the tops off the chemical toilets.

The drive to Geku began. I took over DJ duties, and after a few misses with the Bluetooth connection, got the Rolling Stones and the Allman Brothers to get kicking. The convoy rolled, sweeping past the charming landscape

Now, I'd packed like a boomer for the drive, meaning that I was carrying an ungainly backpack and a large carry-on (on a camping trip, for God's sake). As the rain got harder, the temperature dipped for the night, and having left my carry-on in the Thar, I was forced to roll myself up into a ball. As my teeth chattered, the promise I made myself was to bring a rucksack the next time.

It poured in the morning as well, delaying our early start for Aalo. There was some

ARUNACHAL TOURISM

⇙ That's a fine road at Silapathar in Assam

⇑ A welcome dance at Geku

⇓ A dancer poses in his Tapu war dance outfit

ARUNACHAL TOURISM

unspoken anxiety about the chemical toilets and, not surprisingly, all the units were rendered unusable very quickly. I decided instead to brush my teeth with some fresh, cold mountain water, and make do with a light breakfast consisting of sticky rice cakes steamed in banana leaves and some fragrant chai.

I was again a little unsure about the car I would be allotted for the day-three drive to Basar. The previous night, I'd heard one of the organisers invite volunteers to be Mitali's co-driver. These were really long routes we were covering, and it was understandable for anyone to feel knackered after doing the heavy lifting all by themselves. However, as she walked out to the assembly area, my gracious driver asked me to get my bags into the car.

The drive was again picturesque, full of palm trees and shaggy thatch-roof houses, and a slushy, unpaved stretch just before Boleng proved to be quite riveting in the rain. Two hours later, we pulled up at a primary school in a village named Logum Jini in Aalo, where we feasted on local-style fish and north Indian-style chicken with leaf-steamed rice.

***** ***Apong*****, a mildly intoxicating fermented drink made from rice husk, is consumed all over Arunachal Pradesh and by the Mishing tribe of Assam. It is both a party-time staple and an after-work cooler. In most places, it is served and had in bamboo mugs**

We were in Aalo for the Galo harvest festival of Mopin. The venue was the village community hall, a structure on stilts that looked especially alluring in the overcast afternoon with its moody lighting. The members of the convoy chose their spots—some gathered by the *mithun*-sacrifice site, others whipped out their vlogging paraphernalia to film good-looking couples dressed in chalky white outfits. There were libations on offer in plastic bottles. I struck up a chat with a local official, the middle-aged Itun-Naso, who, apart from being agreeable, was averse to neither portraiture nor patriotism. Itun-Naso introduced me to his sister and brother-in-law, and had a child smear rice paste on my face.

Ziro—the venue of the famous Ziro Festival of Music and the abode of the Apatani—is a picturesque settlement that is currently in the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PRANNAY PATHAK

↖ Houses in Ziro's scenic Biirii basti

↑ Lunch at a dhaba on the way to Yingkiong

↓ Performers indulge shutterbugs with some showmanship

TATA
AS-23AC-9488

CURING HOMESICKNESS IN

Basar

The rain continued and by the time the convoy reached Basar, it was pitch-dark. The residents had a lot planned: we assembled at the quaint-looking town hall. I had the best *apong* here—the hollowed bamboo pitchers with banana-leaf filters raised our spirits immediately. Two local groups were set to perform and when the lights went out during the performance of the latter, the audience members switched on their flashlights and became part of the performance, swaying with the dancers.

Wherever I went in Arunachal, I perceived a refreshing departure from the usual patriarchal norms. Even though women still served food wherever we went, it was great to see them as an integral part of the public space, be it dance performances, festivity, and even in charge of enterprises. Take, for instance, Tumen Basar, who hosted the four of us at her place for the night. Tumen, in her mid-thirties, has a smile on her face where the rest of us have a mouth, and with her husband, the boyish, taciturn-but-friendly Lijum Bagra, she gave us all a warm welcome at her cosy bamboo house. The rest of this happy Galo family includes Tumen's mother and the couple's daughter, who was in her final year of school.

The *rapko* is an ingenious architectural feature in Galo homes—a traditional fireplace-shelf in the centre of the hall. The base has a concrete lining to conduct heat evenly and prevent a fire, and the overhanging shelves can quickly dry grains and hold objects like the *chhuuka*, a woven basket that keeps salt, spoons and other accessories safe.

I do like to think of myself as an adventure guy but the familial vibe at the Basar-Bagra household meant that this night was to become a personal favourite. Back at the camps, I had found luggage management and toilet business a little hard, but here, Tumen regaled us with her jokes and answered all our foolish questions with glee, making some warming *laal chai* as we gathered round the *rapko*.

↖ Young Mishing women perform the Bihu in Gogamukh, Assam

As I stepped a little into view, my co-driver of all these days materialised and handed me the keys to get my stuff into our Thar—yet again. I did as asked and not too long after, the convoy rolled out of Basar for the epic drive to Ziro

The perceptive Tumen gave me a tour of the house alongside coaxing me to memorise common Galo words. I was to call her *aanyi*, or elder sister.

Breakfast at the town hall comprised little bananas that were more fibrous than pulpy, jam toast and classic boiled eggs with some fragrant milky tea. I had my fill and then the familiar worry of not being able to find a Thar took hold of me again. I hadn't spotted Mitali anywhere and even if I did, I was not expecting to be driven one more day—it was a 300-kilometre drive to Ziro today. So I asked Lhakpa to fit me somewhere and waited outside a Scorpio with my bags.

But then the strangest mercy happened. As I stepped a little into view, my co-driver of all these days materialised and handed me the keys to get my stuff into our Thar—yet again. I did as asked and not too long after, the convoy rolled out of Basar for the epic drive to Ziro, that picturesque abode of the Apatani and venue of India's Glastonbury. We slipped into Assam, reached Silapathar and as the convoy hit that peach of a road to Gogamukh, there was finally enough reception to play Tedeschi Trucks. The driver was clearly happy.

THE
Grand Finale

At a trippy café called the Sikang Boggo in Gogamukh, we were treated to some fine music—a rock show by local Mishing artists who did justice to Bihu songs as well as AC/DC and Queen—and some equally exquisite pork. We wrapped up the cultural detour and hit the road, crossing the Subansiri and setting our sights on Kimin in Papum Pare. I always tell people that the Trans-Arunachal Highway is an absolute beauty even where it isn't; after Kimin, the test of the Thar's off-road capabilities began, especially since the famed Arunachal daylight was just about preparing to leave. The car did well for the final 30-odd kilometres, as did Mitali behind the wheel. As it got darker, the convoy links became a little patchy and most people drove purely on instinct. The radio sets never allowed a dull moment and also kept the convoy tied together on tricky switchbacks.

Getting to Ziro took some frustration since the anticipation ran so high. The locals had put together an elaborate event at a resort, with several dance and music performances by troupes and artistes from far and wide. It was a chilly night, but the warmth and enthusiasm of Ziro's zappy residents took care of that. I chatted up the extremely friendly EAC Bamin Tarang and thanked him for the night, as the District Tourism Officer Raji Dikchu regaled one and all with his fun emceeing. We were also presented with replica *babos* (totems installed outside Apatani homes).

*** The Apatani are among the various communities in Arunachal Pradesh that follow the Donyi-Polo faith—an institutionalised set of tribal-animist beliefs that place importance in nature and ecological balance. Followers usually have white flags with a red sun in the middle**

A lot happened during the course of the following day that we spent in Ziro. I sauntered out to the assembly area after breakfast and conveyed my gratitude to Mitali for having driven me all these days—before she could ask me to get my bags. I was to stay back in Ziro even as the convoy would roll on, headed for the snows of Tawang. We did, however, let out a final hurrah in the Ziro forest—a who-gets-the-car-dirtiest contest of sorts before they would be washed for the final leg of the drive. This little excursion to the forest (Myolyang) proved to be a spine-tingling exercise in off-roading.

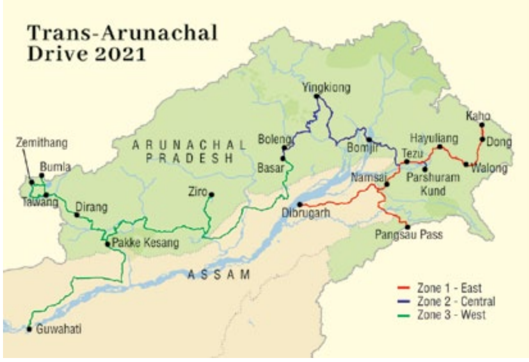
A little later, Mr Tarang accompanied us as we went souvenir-hunting to a local handicrafts emporium, past the town's famed rice paddies where fish are also bred, and colourful traditional houses with Donyi-Polo flags fluttering. I managed to locate the Mishmi *dao* at the shop and almost picked out one that was the size of a machete, when I realised I'd run out of cash. Getting a functional ATM in Ziro is purely a matter of chance, which I *was* to find out during the course of my exploration of Hapoli in the afternoon. Having walked six kilometres from my hotel to the industrial market, I luckily got two locals to give me a ride back. As I walked to the hotel, a drizzle started and I quickly scribbled one more note in my phone: Next time, carry more cash, you dummy.

SARING LINE HOTEL
MOORUK
PASIGHAT-MARIYANG-VINGKIONG ROAD
UPPER SIANG DISTRICT
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
Feeding Restaurant etc.

↖ A colourful roadside dhaba in Upper Siang

traveller ARUNACHAL

How to Reach
Namsai is a two-hour drive (113km) from Dibrugarh's Mohanbari airport. Taxis are easily available at the airport.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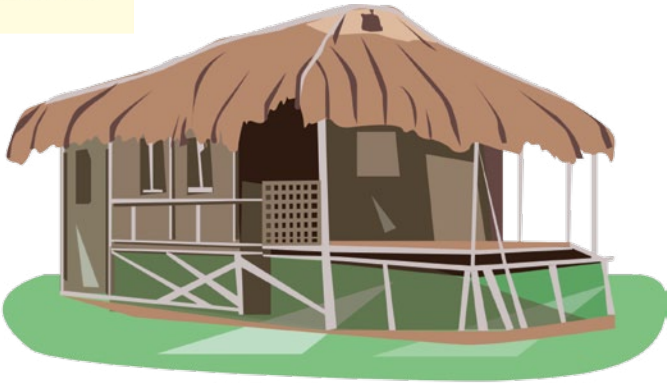
Parshuram Kund
Dibrugarh
Pangsau Pass
Ziro
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
Zemithang
Bumla
Tawang
Dirang
Pakke Kesang
ASSAM
Guwahati
Zone 1 - East
Zone 2 - Central
Zone 3 - West

Where to Stay

Arunachal is a camping-lover's paradise. Campsites are available at Bomjir, Geku and Pakke Kesang but due permission has to be sought (arunachalforests.gov.in/contact_us.html). For a more fulfilling experience, stay at a village house in Basar (87km from Silapathar in Assam). Ziro has several decent hotels—the Ziro Valley Resort is a good bet. Hotels are also available at important stopovers such as Pasighat and Along (Aalo). Tawang's hotels (Hotel Shambhala, Hotel Gorichen and Hotel Nefa, to name a few) provide facilities such as hot water and TV. Homestays are available in Tawang, Ziro and Along.

Permits

You can apply for the Inner-Line Permits at arunachalilp.com. ILPs can also be obtained from offices of the issuing authorities of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh at Delhi, Kolkata, Tezpur, Guwahati, Shillong, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur and Jorhat.



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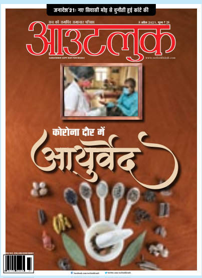
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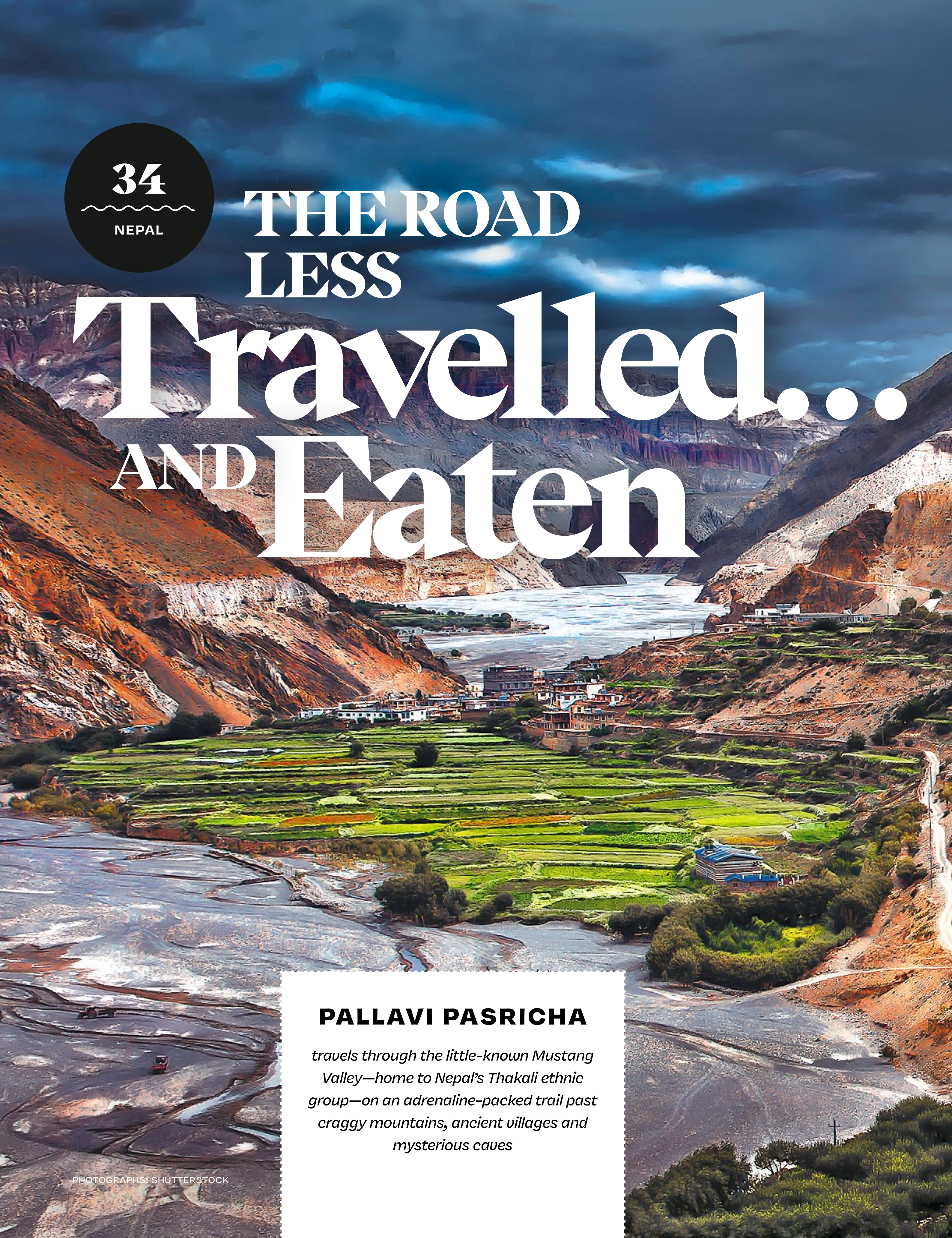

34

NEPAL

THE ROAD LESS Travelled… AND Eaten

PALLAVI PASRICHA

travels through the little-known Mustang Valley—home to Nepal's Thakali ethnic group—on an adrenaline-packed trail past craggy mountains, ancient villages and mysterious caves

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK

↙ The scenic Kali Gandaki Valley in Upper Mustang

***

Landscape

Himalayan peaks, dirt roads and dry riverbeds

***

Mustang

Former Buddhist kingdom and salt trade route

***

Thakalis

Culture, cuisine and traditions

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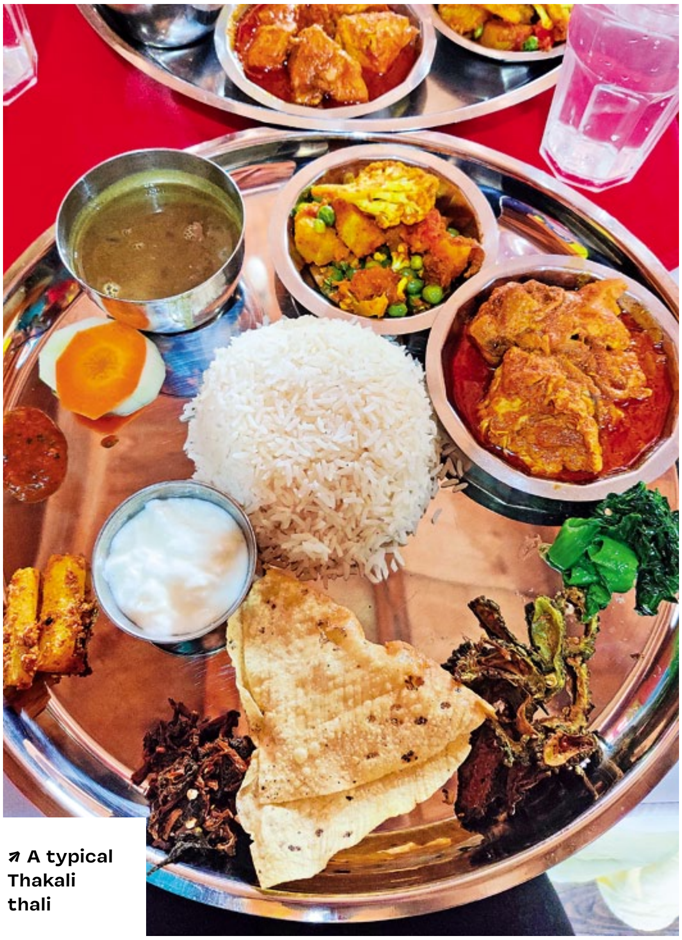
Tel:- 9840245136

PALLAVI PASRICHA



↖ **Local at Lo Manthang**

↗ **A typical Thakali thali**

I

IT IS USUALLY JUST ONCE IN A lifetime that you embark on a journey to one of the remotest, most exotic and less traversed parts of the world. For me that happened when we bumped our way along rough tracks that snake along Mustang Valley in western Nepal to trace the Thakali trail.

When I sit in the tiny aircraft that we take at sunrise from Pokhara to Jomsom, I don't yet know how enriching and enthralling the experience of journeying to the former Buddhist kingdom lying on the Tibetan border will be.

It starts on a stunning note with the plane brushing so close by the Annapurna, Nilgiri, Tukuche and Dhaulagiri peaks that I feel I can touch the sun-kissed, snow-clad heights. Then I am staring into the depths of the Kali Gandaki gorge, one of the world's deepest. Flights (only 18-seater Twin Otters are allowed) land in Jomsom before 10am because the wind speed really picks up after that. Stepping out of the aircraft, we shiver—it's minus four degrees.

Our encounter with the region begins at Jomsom, the official entry point to Lower Mustang valley. We divide our time between Upper and Lower Mustang and spend five nights. We stop for tea and come face to face with the power-packed vehicles that will ferry us on unpaved roads along barren slopes—one Isuzu SUV, two Isuzu pick-up trucks, two CFMoto ZForce SSVs (side-by-side vehicles). I love adventure so am tempted to get behind the wheel but the left-wheel drive plus the fact that I have never driven in such tricky terrain makes me change my mind.

We breakfast at the stunning Dhumba Lake, a pristine expanse of shimmering blue lying at 2,900 metres between towering, snow-capped peaks on one side and tall trees on the other. Lying at the base of Mount Nilgiri, it is just five kilometres from Jomsom and close to Thini village. We quickly wash down sausages, boiled eggs and croissants with tea and coffee.

As we drive deeper into the Mustang valley, the landscape changes dramatically, reminding me of Ladakh and Spiti. In this rain-shadow region, the wind-eroded mountains are craggy and brown. The snow-capped peaks and an occasional touch of green provide the perfect contrast—almost as if an artist has patiently painted the scene at these dizzying heights.

Kagbeni

& MUKTINATH

The villages where we stop date back centuries, but with the advent of a sprinkling of visitors, the first signs of modernity have arrived. Our lunch is in a charming village called Kagbeni, at Yac Donalds, a restaurant famous for yak burgers! Although tempted, I somehow cannot muster the heart to eat it and stick to the traditional fare of dal-bhat which comes on the Thakali thali.

In any case, good food is always at hand

↗ The surreal Mustang Caves

because the team we are travelling with runs one of the most popular restaurants in Kathmandu—Jimbu Thakali—and has brought their kitchen staff along.

After lunch, we walk down narrow, cobblestoned paths to see a deity that guards the village, a monastery (Kag Chode) that dates back to 1429 and simple mud houses. Located along the Kali Gandaki River, Kagbeni is the last village in lower Mustang and is also known as the 'Gateway to Upper Mustang.' For those who want a better understanding of its history, Yac Donalds conducts walking tours.

After lunch we visit the most famous pilgrimage site in Mustang—Muktinath—sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists. This is the only place in the region where you find tarmac roads but the final steep trek to the temple gives me a rude reality check on my fitness levels.

Located at 3,800 metres, Muktinath is one of the highest temples in the world. We spot many locals taking a dip in the water—it supposedly leads to salvation after death. Buddhists also believe this is the place where Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) meditated.

Reaching our next stop, Lete village, where we are to spend the night, turns into an adventure. With two paths blocked, we drive over the Kali Gandaki riverbed but lose our way as it's already dark. For a while we follow the tyre marks of other vehicles but almost sink into a swamp when we finally notice a path. Little do I know that this experience is just a foretaste of the journey ahead.

After a restful night at Kalopani Guesthouse, I wake up to the stunning sight of Tukuche Peak right in front and Annapurna to the south. Dhaulagiri is partially visible as well and I have my breakfast with this majestic view.

Tukuche

VILLAGE & DISTILLERY

It is time to explore another ancient village called Tukuche, famous for its apples and a nearly four-decade-old distillery owned and run by 82-year-old Kalpana Sherchan and her son NirjharMan Sherchan. It is also the ancestral village of GauravMan and Vivek Sherchan, who own the Jimbu Thakali restaurant.

Home to the Thakalis, who are primarily traders, Mustang lies along an ancient salt trade route between Tibet and India. The food of the Thakalis has become one of the most popular cuisines of Nepal and it is only appropriate that our mainstay on the Thakali trail is traditional Thakali fare.

A typical thali, which we eat almost daily, consists of dal, rice, saag, fermented vegetable, bitter gourd, fried potato, a bowl of chicken, mutton or fish and accompaniments like radish pickle, papad

The Japanese Monk

It is believed that Japanese Buddhist monk Ekai Kawaguchi visited Tukuche village in 1899 and stayed there for a few months. He was on his way to Tibet and supposedly stayed in the house where Tukuche distillery is now located.

and sweet curd. It is wholesome and delicious. GauravMan—better known as GMan—tells me, "Even though rice is an integral part of Thakali food, it does not grow in Mustang. The environment is not conducive for crop cultivation and the rice is imported from India; that is why trade was always important."

It takes a while to get used to the slightly sour and tangy taste of the fermented vegetables, but I love them from the word go. Vivek's mother has passed on authentic recipes to Rishi Chaudary, the main chef at Jimbu Thakali.

Older than Buddhism, Thakali culture has deep-rooted traditions. They do not worship an idol, but have shamans, who they believe connect directly with God. There are only a handful left in the clan and we spend an evening with one of them, Bhupendra Gauchan.

Upper MUSTANG

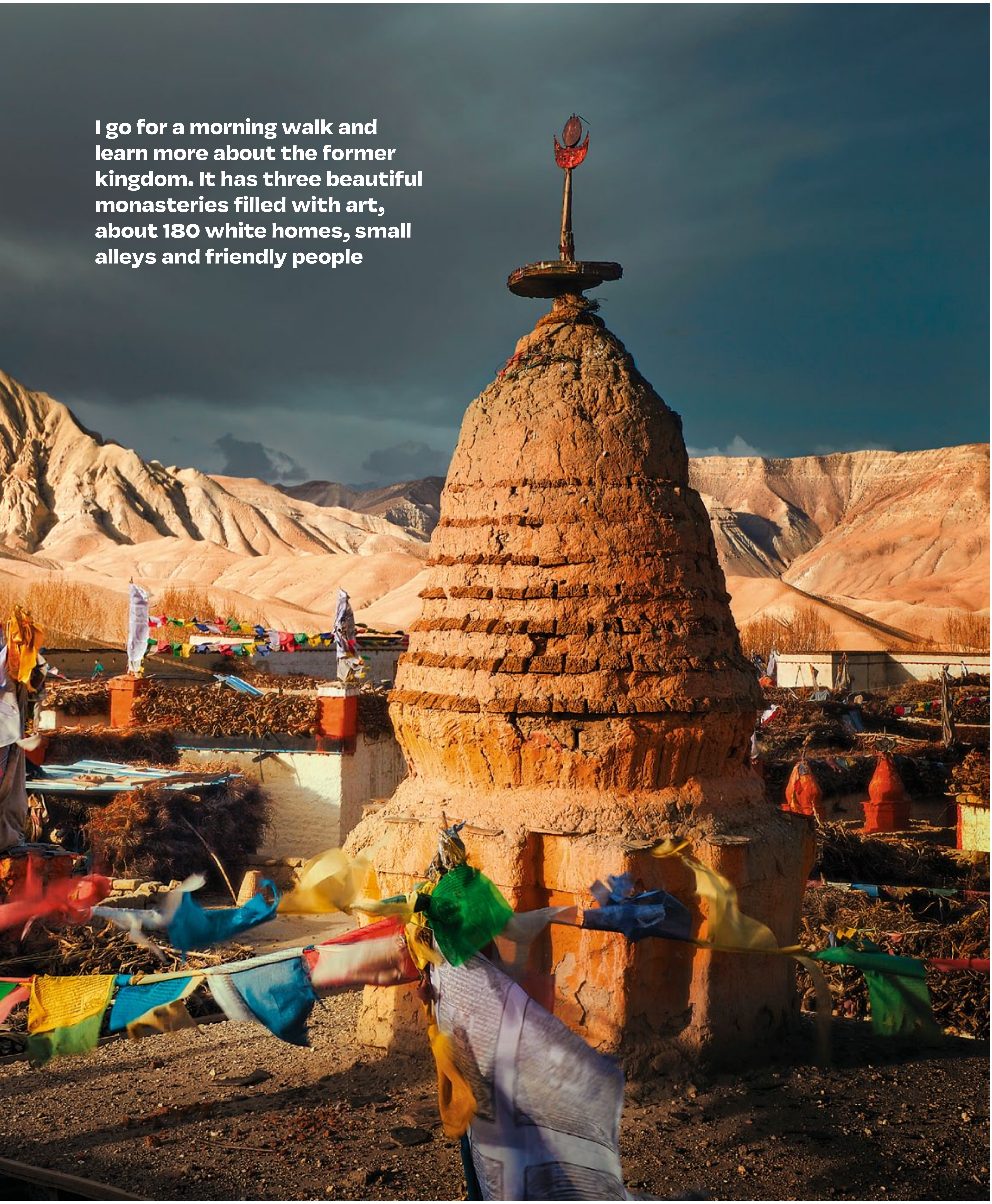
The real drama begins in Upper Mustang, where the terrain is dry and rocky, chiselled red mountain cliffs hang over rough paths and heart-stopping, narrow bends leave you clinging to your car seat.

We travel six hours (114km from Lete) to reach Lo Manthang, the 14th-century walled city of the kingdom of Lo that lies close to the Tibet border and is considered to be one of the last strongholds of traditional Tibetan life and culture. Steeped in history, this is our home for two nights. The red palace that was made by the first king of Mustang, Ame Pal, still stands strong. Tourists were allowed to enter only in 1992 and the monarchy was abolished only in 2008, so it has remained virtually unchanged.

I go for a morning walk and learn more about the former kingdom. It has three beautiful monasteries filled with art—Dragkar-Thegchen Ling Gompa, Jampa Gompa and Thupchen Gompa—about 180 white homes with colourful windows and doors, small alleys and friendly people.

Next day we go to the legendary man-made Mustang Caves that have been carved into cliffs and remain shrouded in mystery. Archaeologists have discovered human remains, paintings, manuscripts, artefacts and Buddhist murals but have yet to unlock the puzzle of who made them. We get a ticket to enter the most famous one—Shija Jong—and it's an incredible experience. We go up a few steps on the mountain side to clamber in, then go up make-shift wooden ladders into a warren of interlinked chambers where we could not even stand straight because of the low roof.

↗ Capital of the former Lo kingdom



I go for a morning walk and learn more about the former kingdom. It has three beautiful monasteries filled with art, about 180 white homes, small alleys and friendly people

SIDDHANT MAN SHRESTHA

↖ SUVs on the way to Muktinath

↑ Bull-head pipe of the holy spring at Muktinath temple

↓ A man sunning himself in front of the city wall of Lo Manthang

We explore three levels and could have gone higher but don't have the strength. The ceiling is black as if covered with soot that comes from cooking. As I return, I wonder who lived here, when and why?

Our last stunning ascent is to the 4,612m Korala Pass and we set a record by taking the CFMoto SSVs to that height. I am elated to be amid the craggy mountains with snow-capped peaks and fluttering prayer flags. The wind speed makes it a challenge to stand straight for even a minute but the thrill of being in such a dramatic landscape is worth it. At that moment I vow to one day make a go for the Everest Base Camp, which at 5,364 metres is 700 metres higher.

Tiji Festival

Held for three days in May, this is the most popular festival in Lo Manthang. It marks the victory of good over evil and dates back to the 17th century and is celebrated with dances, prayers and chants. This year it was from 8th to 10th May.

The next day we are on our way back to Jomsom and I decide to sit in the SSV with Gaurav. He is the only one who's been to Upper Mustang before and tells me that things have improved because, when he came last, there were hardly any roads. Still, the rough-hewn paths mean that by the time we return I am coated with dust, down to my eyelids.

We stop on the way at Dhakmar to click the tall, spectacular red cliffs which legend says were coloured with a vanquished demon's blood. They remind me of the Grand Canyon. We down a couple of beers and then steer our way to the base at Jomsom where we stay for a night.

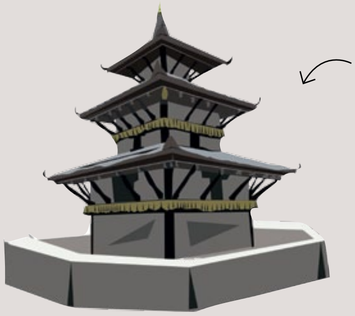
We celebrate when we reach back because in the last few days we have made memories and friends for life. Come and explore the Thakali trail because the adventure on this road less travelled is something that you will never ever forget. At least I will not.

traveller NEPAL

How to reach: Jomsom airport has regular daily flights to and from Pokhara. But these are early morning flights as the wind speed picks up after that. The duration is 20 minutes.

Mustang
Kathmandu
NEPAL
INDIA

Where To Go



☒ **Muktinath:** Famous pilgrimage site for Buddhists and Hindus

☒ **Tukuche Distillery:** In Tukuche village to taste apple and apricot brandy

☒ **Marpha:** A charming village near Jomsom (13km) that's famous for apples

☒ **Mustang Caves:** Ancient caves that go back many centuries

☒ **Dhumba Lake:** A stunning lake close to Jomsom

Where to Stay

☒ **Lete Kalopani Guest House** (kalopaniguesthouse.com)
- Tariff is ₹1,200-2,500 per night

☒ **Jomsom Hotel Om's Home** (www.omshomejomsom.com);
- Tariff from $70 (₹5,000 approximately) per night

☒ **Lo Manthang Lotus Holiday Inn;**
- Tariff from ₹2,000 per night

☒ **Royal Mustang Resort** (royalmustangresort.com);
- Tariff from ₹8,000 per night

*** You can't come to Mustang and not have their coffee. Just remember it's alcoholic**

Getting Around

You'll need a 4x4 wheel drive. There are two ways to do this:

☒ Hire it from Pokhara since luxury 4x4 vehicles like Land Cruisers would only be available there. The cost is ₹30,000 per day.

☒ In Jomsom your hotel can book the vehicle. But only Scorpio is available and the cost is ₹10,000 per day.

The cheaper way to travel is shared jeep from Jomsom to Lo Manthang. The cost per person fair is ₹1,000. The jeeps will only depart when full.

Good To Know

☒ To visit Upper Mustang, non-Nepalese need to apply for a permit from a registered trekking agency. A minimum of two travellers plus a guide need to be present. It costs $500 (approx. ₹36,000) for 10 days, and $50 (approx. ₹3,600) per day per person after 10 days.

☒ Travellers need to obtain certain permits from the Nepal Tourism Board office in Kathmandu or Pokhara. This includes Annapruna Conservation Area Permit (ACAP) which costs NPR 3,000 (₹1,800) per person for non-Nepalese, NPR 1,000 (₹600) per person for SAARC nationals and NPR 100 (₹62) for Nepali nationals.

☒ The Trekkers Information Management System (TIMS) card costs NPR 1,000 (₹622) per person for non-Nepalese and NPR 300 (₹186) for SAARC nationals. You also need to provide passport details, trip itinerary and two passport-size photos.

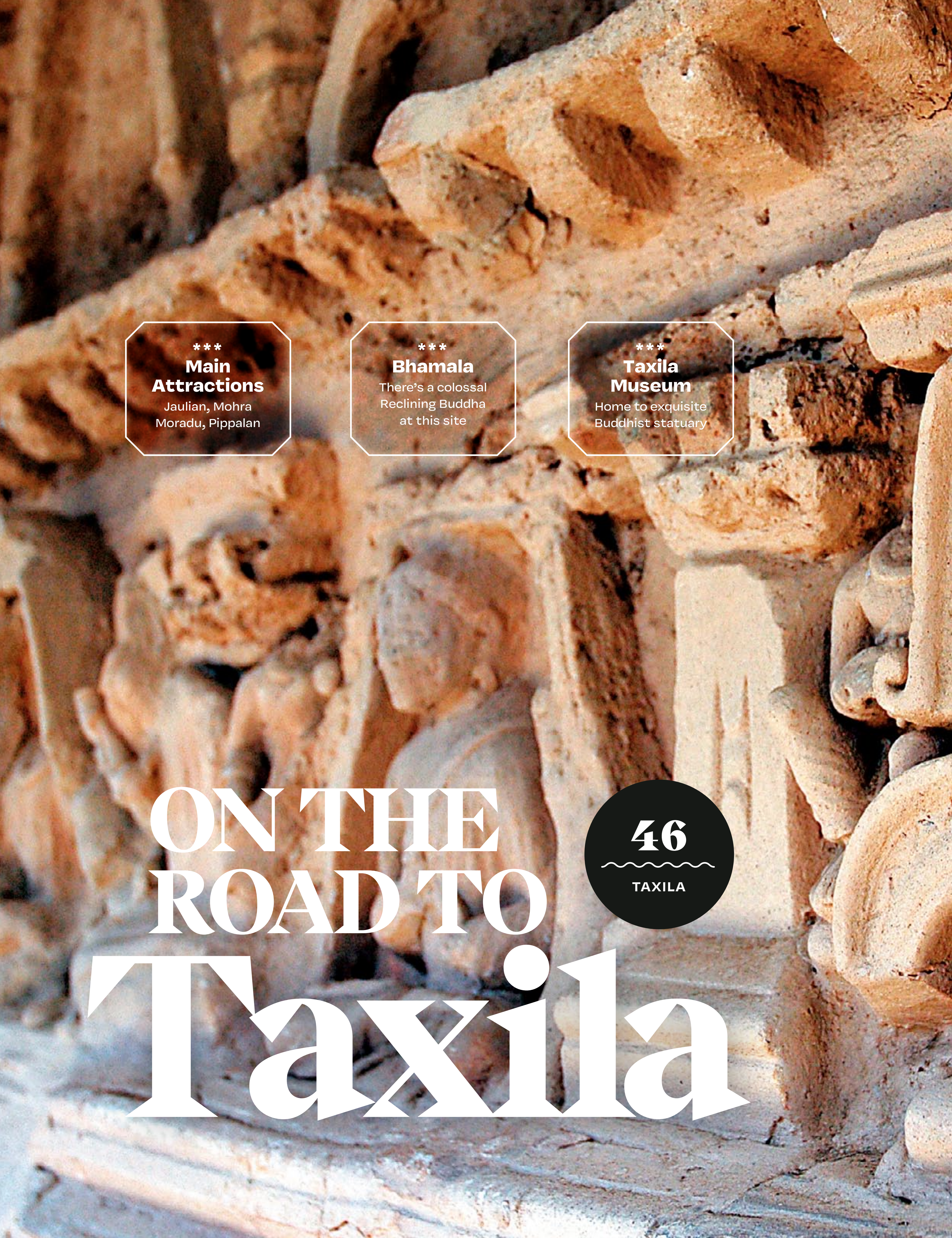
What to Eat

☒ It is advisable to have at least one meal at the hotel where you are staying.

☒ Try Mustang coffee that's made with raski which is Nepali rice wine.

☒ If you are fond of burgers then try the yak burger at Yac Donalds in Kagbeni.

☒ There are coffee shops and bakeries in Jomsom but as you go towards Upper Mustang the food gets more basic. Dal-bhat is something you can always get even at small dhabas and eateries.



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Main Attractions

Jaulian, Mohra Moradu, Pippalan

***

Bhamala

There’s a colossal Reclining Buddha at this site

***

Taxila Museum

Home to exquisite Buddhist statuary

ON THE ROAD TO Taxila

46

TAXILA

↙ **Buddhist carvings at the Jaulian Monastery at Taxila**

SUNITA DWIVEDI

makes an important stop on her journey in search of Buddhist heritage in lands that were once part of the Gandhara kingdom

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

ON THE WAY BACK FROM THE STUPA of Manikyala, we crossed the famous Rawat Market where fancy auto-rickshaws and colourful trucks could be seen unloading fruits and vegetables brought from the neighbouring villages. The air was thick with the stench from a distillery nearby. Ayesha informed me that the famous sugarcane belt of Punjab ran through Rawat and fed many sugar mills and distilleries. Not just sugar, Rawat was also the hub of polished marble brought from the quarries of Manshera and Mardan.

The famous sixteenth-century Rawat Fort stood 15 km off the main Grand Trunk Road. Founded as a caravanserai built over the remains of an eleventh-century Ghaznavid era fort, the serai was fortified by the Gakkhar rulers to defend the Potohar Plateau from the forces of the Afghan ruler, Sher Shah Suri. The Gakkhar chief Sultan Sarang is said to have died fighting the Afghan king in 1546, and was buried at the fort along with his 16 sons who also died alongside him.

Further on, the Margalla Hills, which are a part of the Himalayan foothills, swung into view. At the town of Bahria, we left the Islamabad road going northwards and took a left turn for Pindi where Saidul Hasan Zaidi, president of the Gandhara Art and Cultural Association, was scheduled to join us for lunch. His wife, born in Peshawar, traces her roots to the city of Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. She extended a warm embrace on hearing that I came from her ancestral town of Lucknow. My final destination, however, was Zulfiqar's (secretary, Gandhara Art and Cultural Association) residence in Bani Gala, Islamabad, a 30-minute drive from Pindi.

Heavy rains had lashed Islamabad through the night. Bani Gala was flooded—lanes, bylanes and parks of the city were submerged. Weather forecasters announced more rains for the next couple of days, but the rain was no deterrent. I woke up with the sun for the 32-km ride to the world heritage site that lay at the foot of the Murree Hills. The drive took barely a couple of hours.

Driving along Murree Road, we crossed Avenue 7 and headed towards Taxila. Along this road, one can see the original cobble-stoned, medieval-era Grand Trunk Road to the left, cutting through Margalla Hills, which is a heritage site preserved by the tourism authorities of Pakistan. The old road is a pathway to the past when many invaders and missionaries travelled from Kabul to Sonargaon (near Dhaka in Bangladesh) along this road.

The road to Taxila cut away from the main Grand Trunk Road to my right. We took a U-turn and crossed over to the other side and then took a left for Taxila.

Alexander
IN TAXILA

When Alexander first landed at Taxila with his army in the fourth century BC, it was one of the largest and richest cities of the Indus situated in a land of flowing streams, fountains and thickly wooded jungles.

A number of streams still flow along the ancient ruins, fountains still rush out of rock crevices and thick jungles still hem the celebrated city. And we drove along the network of roads that approached monastic ruins, we were amazed at the virgin beauty of the low hills covered in immense greenery. The Haro River and numerous other streams water the approximately 10-km-wide and 25-km-long corridor in which the ancient city of Taxila was born and died.

Ancient
CITIES OF TAXILA

When John Marshall, director general of the Archaeological Survey of India (1902–1928), explored the valley in the early twentieth century, he found ruins of numerous Buddhist monuments comprising vestiges from three different eras—Achaemenian, Greek and Kushan—a time when extensive building activities took place here. It has been generally thought that Bhir Mound belonged to the Achaemenian era; Sirkap and Jandial to the Greek era; and Sirsukh, Jaulian, Mohra Moradu, Dharmarajika, Pipplan to the Kushan era. Beside the remains of these three ancient cities, Marshall also found a large number of isolated monuments, mainly Buddhist stupas and monasteries, scattered over the surrounding hilly forests of Taxila.

Driving along the main Taxila road towards the Jaulian Monastery, one will find that the roads run through a long dusty haze of low blue hills that are actually the ruins of the Bhir Mound, believed to be the most ancient of all the sites at Taxila. The sprawling site consists of successive settlements ranging from the Achaemenid period of the sixth century BC to the Mauryan period of the third century BC.

After the city on the Bhir Mound was destroyed, the Bactrian Greek king Demetrius transferred the population to the city of Sirkap on the east side of the Tamra Nala in the second century BC. An inscription found here has reference to 'Priyadarsi', the title used by Mauryan Emperor Asoka who ruled over Taxila in the third century BC. The inscription on a

piece of marble, originally belonging to an octagonal column is written in Aramaic—probably by Asoka c. 260 BC—and is categorised as one of the Minor Rock Edicts. The inscription is displayed at the Taxila Museum today. The text of the inscription is very fragmented, but it has been established that it contains twice, line 9 and line 12 and mentions MR'N PRYDRS (our Lord Priyadarsi), the characteristic title used by Asoka. According to historian Radhakumud Mookerji, Asoka was the first king in India to have issued inscriptions in the manner of the old Achaemenian kings.

When Alexander first landed at Taxila with his army in the fourth century BC, it was one of the largest and richest cities of the Indus situated in a land of flowing streams, fountains and thickly wooded jungles

In 1863–64, Alexander Cunningham reports of the famous legend of the Buddha cutting off his head to feed a hungry tiger which is attached to the city of Sirkap (or 'Sirkat', meaning head cutting—*taksha sira*). The copperplate inscription from the beginning of the Christian era gives the city its name—Taksha Sila. Remains of a stupa were found in the residential area of Sirkap and the most famous structure here

A view of the Dharmarajika stupa

PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK

↑ A series of votive stupas at Jaulian

↘ Sitting Buddha at the Taxila Museum

SUNITA DWIVEDI

is the double-headed eagle stupa, dated second century BC. Towards the extreme south of the Sirkap city excavations have unearthed the possible site of a university or establishment.

The third ancient city of Taxila is Sirsukh of which I could see only a part of the walls. Fragments of the wall spread out in a vast thickly shrubby area. Its stone masonry, rectangular planning and defensive wall indicate that it dates from the first century AD of the Kushan period.

Jaulian, Mohra Moradu and Pippalan, dated to fourth–fifth century AD, are the three well-preserved monasteries on the Hathial spur, and are the main attractions for any visitor to Taxila.

However, the raw beauty of the Zoroastrian temple of Jandiala (dated second century BC to second century AD) built of massive blocks of stone cannot be missed, as it is on the way to the Mohra Moradu and Jaulian monasteries. Here, one will notice that the temple is located on an elevation and reached by stone steps. Whether the elevation was due to a low hill or was artificially created cannot be said. Also, the roof of the entire structure is absent giving an idea that the temple stood in an open courtyard. Ionic columns and pilasters and massive blocks of sandstone are still strewn around giving the appearance that some natural disaster shook the structure and led to its collapse.

The temple once consisted of a square sanctuary, a meeting hall and a courtyard, the remains of which were dug up by archaeologists during the first half of the twentieth century AD. According to historian Ihsan H. Nadiem, the monument closely resembles ancient Greek temples and may have been dedicated to a Zoroastrian cult giving evidence of the presence of other

Inaugurated in 1928, the Taxila Museum's large central hall flanked by two galleries displays exquisite Buddhist statuary art in stone, stucco and terracotta; coins; and inscriptions recovered during excavations at the various sites at Taxila

religions during the Buddhist period.

North of Taxila, the road reaches Haripur. On this highway N-125 via Khanpur lies the famous monastic site of Bhamala, located in the midst of hills in Haripur district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, located 45 km from Taxila. The startling discovery of the world's oldest and largest colossal Reclining Buddha statuary was made at Bhamala. The Archaeology Department of Pakistan unveiled the 48-ft-long and 1,700-year-old statuary at the site, lying just beyond the modern village of Khanpur with the Haro River flowing at its foot.

According to Abdul Samad, director of the Department of Archaeology and Museums, the 'Sleeping Buddha' from third century AD is believed to be the world's oldest. In addition to this, over 500 Buddhist antiquities have been discovered at Bhamala. Bhamala is best known for its famous fourth-century cruciform stupa, which is a part of the larger Bhamala Buddhist Complex.

Significantly, the present Karakoram Highway running over an ancient route that connected the Upper Indus Valley with the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang through the Pamir Mountains passed along the celebrated cities of Taxila and Haripur where dense Buddhist settlements came up as early as the first century AD. The Karakoram Highway was the northern extension of the main trade and pilgrim corridor, the Uttarapath connecting the valleys of the Indus and the Oxus.

It was noted during the construction of the modern Karakoram Highway that a much earlier route following similar directions existed as early as the first century AD. As mentioned earlier, the Pilgrim Corridor—the location of Asokan Edicts at Mansehra and Shahbazgarhi—marked the start of such a route. According to historian Romila Thapar, inscriptions in Brahmi, Kharosthi and Bactrian, and engravings of Buddhist images and themes along the way date the earlier route to the start of the Christian era. Significantly, at the time of Xuanzang's travels on this road to Tashkurgan in AD 644, the region was populated by Buddhists.

The Karakoram Highway which follows the route of the Indus River right down as far as Thakot descends towards Taxila and Islamabad. To date 30,000 petroglyphs and 5,000 inscriptions in more than 10 different languages have been identified along the highway.

Besides the colossal Reclining Buddha at the Bhamala Buddhist Archaeological Complex near Haripur, another Buddha colossi was found at Kargah, 10 km from Gilgit. A massive figure of the Buddha from the seventh–eighth century AD has been carved on the cliff face. Nearby are the ruins of a monastery with stupas from where a large number of manuscripts from the fifth century AD was found in the 1930s. These documents make up the well-known Gilgit Manuscript. Apart from this, several other Buddha colossi were excavated from the monasteries of Takht-i-Bahi and Sahri Bahlol in Mardan.

Treasures

OF TAXILA

Inaugurated in 1928 by the then minister of Education, Sir Muhammad Habibullah, the Taxila Museum is located along the road to Dharmarajika. The museum's large central hall flanked by two galleries displays exquisite Buddhist statuary art in stone, stucco and terracotta; coins; and inscriptions recovered during excavations at the various sites at Taxila. There are also numerous stucco images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, relic caskets obtained from monastic cells and stupas exhibited in showcases, votive stupas, railings of stupas, head of the Buddha and bodhisattvas—some of them found severed from life-size images of the Buddha.

The visitor is welcomed at the entrance by the tall, exquisitely embellished stupa from Mohra Moradu. It is only a copy, the real stupa lies in Cell 9 of the monastery. But the museum provides a closer look and an opportunity to study the stupa in detail. Another object of great antiquity is a fragment of an inscribed marble pillar from Sirkap that mentions Asoka as 'Priyadarshi'. This pillar is one among the many that lined the Uttarapath or the Northern Highroad from Pataliputra to Taxila.

We drove on the Grand Trunk Road to take the Kashmir Highway to Islamabad. It was not an easy ride. Protestors supporting Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri had blocked the road with containers and were still camping in front of the Parliament despite the heavy rains and an imminent flood. When we reached Bani Gala at 7pm, the downpour continued. Inner areas of the city were in knee-deep water and I was worried about the journey to Peshawar the next day.

↑ Multi-layered stupa at Mohra Moradu

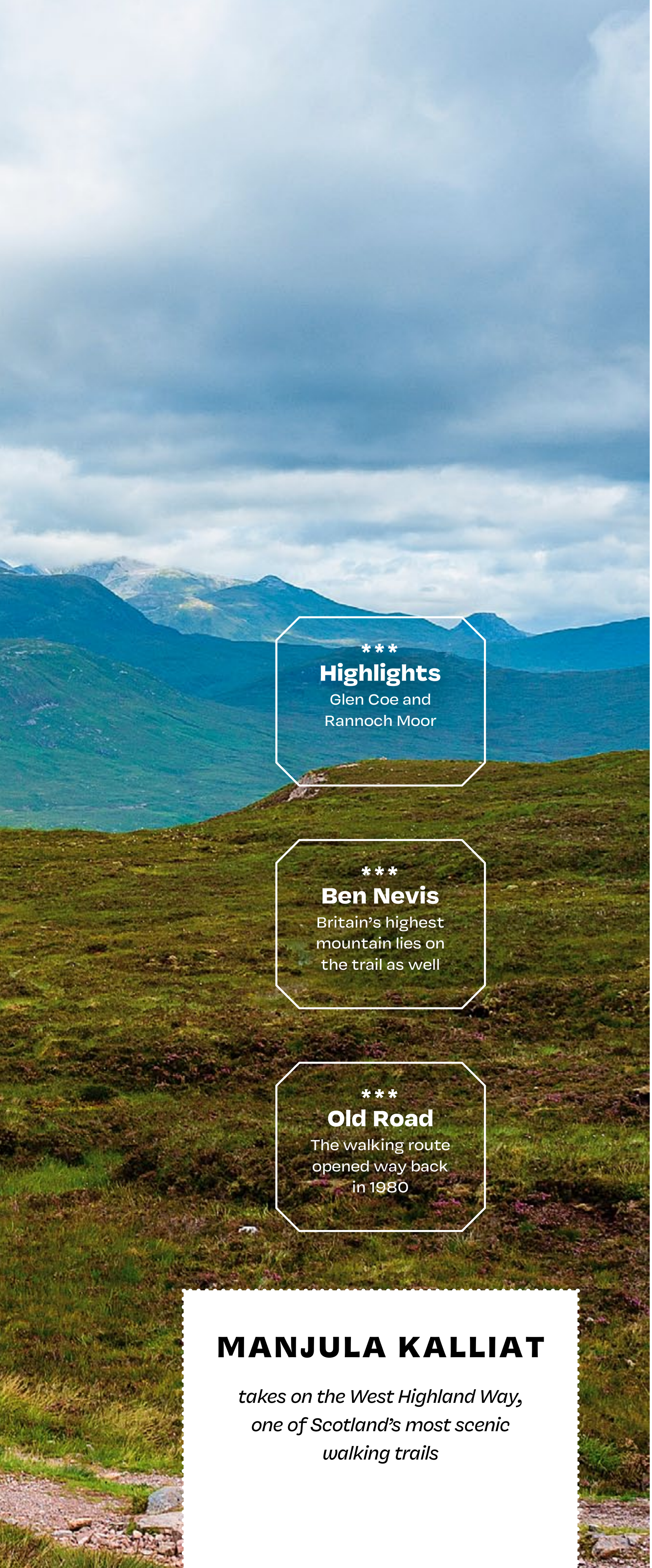
SUNITA DWIVEDI

EXCERPTED WITH THE PERMISSION OF RUPA PUBLICATIONS FROM *BUDDHA IN GANDHARA* BY SUNITA DWIVEDI HARDBACK; 336PP WITH COLOUR INSERTS; ₹795

Sunita Dwivedi left her full time job as a journalist (with The Times of India, The Hindustan Times *and others) in the late 1990s to pursue her passion for travelling and photography on the Silk Road through Asia and Europe. She has been retracing the Silk Road through China, Central Asia and India for over two decades now. Her previous historical travelogues also cover Buddhist heritage along the Asian circuit of the Silk Road:* Buddhist Heritage Sites of India, Buddha in Central Asia: A Travelogue, In Quest of the Buddha: A Journey on the Silk Road, *all published by Rupa Publications. Together with the latest book they form a tetralogy on Buddhist heritage*

THE long WALK

PHOTOGRAPHS: SHUTTERSTOCK



⇙ Hikers take the West Highland Way in Scotland

* * *

Highlights

Glen Coe and Rannoch Moor

* * *

Ben Nevis

Britain's highest mountain lies on the trail as well

* * *

Old Road

The walking route opened way back in 1980

MANJULA KALLIAT

takes on the West Highland Way, one of Scotland's most scenic walking trails

THERE WAS THE FAINTEST FLICKER OF DISAPPOINTMENT ON THE CASHIER'S FACE as he printed out my train ticket for Milngavie. I had asked for a single to "Mul-guy" like I was forewarned to, denying him the chance for a chuckle at an all-too-common mispronunciation.

Milngavie is about 10 kilometres from central Glasgow. It has none of the cool edginess of the city centre but has nevertheless made quite a name for itself—one, well, for its non-phonetic name and, two, for being the starting point of the West Highland Way, the best known of Scotland's Great Trails.

Britain is a walking haven. Yet, during all the years that I lived there, I hardly contemplated anything beyond an aimless amble in its national parks. But, as it happens with places (and people) once they are beyond one's reach, Britain now sparkled with promise and intrigue. Plus, having tackled a section of the magnificent Camino de Santiago the previous year, I was beginning to fancy myself a long-distance walker.

Save for a nodding acquaintance with Edinburgh and surrounds, I'd had little to do with Scotland. And so, a multi-day walk in the Caledonian end of Britain it had to be.

Day 1

154km to destination

An obelisk in Milngavie town centre marked the flag-off point. A panel of murals summing up the highlights of the walk, a grammable backdrop against which walkers clicked cheery 'victory sign' photos, and an arrow pointing towards a winding canopied pathway conveyed a sense of drama worthy of the 154km-long trail to Fort William.

At the far end of the pathway was another solo walker. I had briefly met her the night before, as I made a quick Tesco run to pick up some supplies for the walk. Behind her, and within earshot, was a young couple. A dog, that had found its way into the trail, sauntered around them. He had about him an air of bewilderment—at having encountered humans when he wasn't expecting any. Not too far behind

↗ The Glengoyne Distillery at Dumgoyne

me, I could hear the shuffle of more feet. The lot of us marched along in a purposeful manner, as one only can at the start of a walk.

The path soon opened up and rolling British hills filled the frame. The wind was now picking up. Slowly, the other walkers started disappearing from view, as our walking tempo and halts went out of sync. Soon after, I had my first sighting of the highland cow. A family of them grazed softly as the wind played mischief with their luxuriant fringes.

I had 19 kilometres of ground to cover today. It was the perfect distance for the first day—long enough to convey the scale of the trail yet just stopping short of being overwhelming. Other than setting an approximate daily ETA, I had decided to walk without a regimen—no pre-decided lunch stops or hourly milestones. Today was an exception though, as I had an 11.30am tour booked in one of the distilleries along the way.

Now, I'm quite the whisky philistine, but Glengoyne distillery was right on the path, and it seemed a real shame to pass up on an opportunity to visit. The tour group was welcomed with a sampling—trays laden with drams of liquid gold. One potent gulp, and I set aside my glass furtively. My sacrilege didn't go unnoticed, as a bunch of whisky aficionados locked eyes, shaking their heads in exaggerated disbelief.

The tour itself was nicely done, with many interesting whisky and non-whisky related revelations along the way. The idea of the 'Scottish Highlands' was one of them. The term is often used in a geographical context to loosely refer to the area above the Highland Boundary Fault Line, but in reality, it's more of a cultural and historical construct.

Fuzzy definitions aside, I knew that the West Highland Way (WHW) started in the lowlands and slowly made its way towards the highlands. And, so, with some cool whisky facts under my belt, I continued traipsing up the lowlands. Presently, I came to a breakout area in the trail, adjacent to an animal farm. Setting down my daypack, I tucked into my lunch while, nearby, three Shetland ponies—Comet, Teddy and Bolt—chomped on theirs.

The rest of the walk, through nameless hamlets and stone bridges, passed without incident. Eventually, all that stood between me and my halt for the night, Drymen, was a paddock. Cows in various degrees of belligerence roamed free range within. I checked my notes to reconfirm that I indeed had to walk across it. 'A tense scamper' would be the most dignified way of describing what followed.

To celebrate my arrival into Drymen, I treated myself to a substantial slice of Victoria sponge cake, following it up, later that evening, with the traditional fish soup, Cullen Skink, at the local pub. Drymen, as indeed all the little towns and villages along the WHW, is wonderfully geared towards walkers. The sight of the lone diner, as I discovered day after day, hardly raised any eyebrows.

Day 2

135km to destination

The next morning, having left my case packed and ready for the baggage transfer service, I took leave of my lovely hostess and her charmingly Scottish B&B.

The B&B, as it turned out, was a bit off the trail, and I was having trouble getting back on it. Google Maps was not having its finest hour and sent me scurrying all over the place. I eventually walked up to a local for assistance—a dour pensioner out to get the morning paper. He helped solve my directional conundrum but not before telling me off (twice!) to replace "that" (my phone) with "a real map".

Drymen is the gateway to the mighty Loch Lomond, the largest lake in Scotland by surface area. An hour up a gravelly path, and I was treated to a partial glimpse of it through the bushy vegetation.

Meanwhile, the gradients were getting steeper. Conic Hill is a favourite among day trippers and for those wanting a taster of the great Scottish outdoors without the commitment of a multi-day hike. After a prolonged drill of bend-climb-plateau-repeat, the hill finally relented, theatrically revealing Loch Lomond.

Dense clouds hung low like a canopy of candyfloss, casting sombre silhouettes over the loch. Here and there, patches of blue sky broke free, the light sneaking through adding a flourish of bright green to parts of Conic Hill, consummating this most exquisite of pictures. A picture that, at once, made you reach for your gratitude journal and also lament that topping this would be a hard ask.

The walk down the hill brought me to the lively village of Balmaha and the 'bonnie shores' of the loch. Boats bobbed in its serene waters as walkers and day-trippers milled around its banks.

I took some time out to enjoy the changing scenery. First, a breather on the pebbly shores of the loch. And a little later, a lunch break on a rotting foot bridge in the midst of the thicket, while keeping an eye out for unsolicited critters that might want to hitch a ride to town.

Well, more community than town. For that was all there was to Rowardennan—three lodging options for weary travellers and little else. I can't claim to have stayed in many hostels but can confidently vouch that the Rowardennan Youth Hostel has one of the most stunning settings for hostels anywhere in the world.

The immense expanse of the loch wrapped around much of the hostel's generous yard, whose gentle grass underfoot was the perfect antidote to tired feet. I pulled my phone out apologetically, as one might in the middle of a virtuoso performance. Perhaps it was impertinent to not 'be in the moment', but to leave that vision uncaptured on camera would've been a bigger transgression.

Day 3

112km to destination

Setting out the following morning, I was aware that I was in for a double whammy—a trail that was not just long but also rough.

The path now snaked through stunningly lush woodlands, punctuated by tiny cascades.

↗ **Balmaha village on Loch Lomond**

Underfoot, it was getting increasingly craggy, and my laboured breathing cut through the quietude. Just as I was beginning to crave a break, the Inversnaid Hotel rose from the greenery. Settling down with a cup of tea in the 'walkers section' of the elegant hotel, I watched the darkening sky outside with consternation.

Glad that the bumpy section was behind me, should the skies open up, I resumed my walk jauntily. Just five minutes in, I saw a signboard that marked the entry into a nature reserve and also served as a warning for the 'very rough terrain ahead'.

Scrambling over broken paths, cuddling boulders to negotiate treacherous drops and side-stepping perilous tree roots that cropped up unannounced from their subterranean hideouts, I spent the better part of the next two hours relearning the nuances of the word 'rough'. And without another soul in sight. Well, at least, it stayed dry.

I trudged along thus, proud of my pluckiness. Until I came upon a lad clambering up towards me, mountain bike slung on his shoulder. He was cycling down the WHW in the opposite direction.

Feeling not so plucky anymore, I turned my attention to the cultural highlights of the trail. Rob Roy's cave was one of them. A signpost pointed to a hollow, partially hidden by stone, where the famous outlaw turned hero had sought refuge while on the run.

The loch had been close at hand all along, but when the undergrowth finally thinned away, I could flick my fingers in its icy waters. Mist draped patchily around the expanse of the loch, while, in the distance, the West Highland Line train whooshed by to its destination, playing hide and seek with the dense foliage. Now, I was glad for the solitude—to be privy to this view that was solely for the eyes of the hiker. And the three feral goats who relaxed by the far shore of the loch.

In keeping with the Scottish 'right to roam' tradition, this section of the trail was peppered with bothies—stone huts meant as temporary shelter for passers-by. But there was no semblance of anything staffed, let alone an eatery. Cursing my own miscalculation, I sat down in the middle

Eventually, all that stood between me and Drymen was a paddock. Cows in various degrees of belligerence roamed free range within. I checked my notes to reconfirm that I indeed had to walk across it. 'A tense scamper' would be the most dignified way of describing what followed

of nowhere to lunch on some crumbly biscuits fished out from the bottom of my daypack.

Eventually, another walker came by. Flashing a toothy grin, the Scot went on to elaborate, at length, how he had taken to doing just parts of the WHW every year. He simply walked as much as he wanted to—stopping when he ran out of enthusiasm or money, and then picking up the trail months later when circumstances were more favourable.

The loch was now firmly behind me. Some serious inclines, a dreary underpass and several stiles later, I finally started seeing signs of habitation. An hour later, I collapsed gratefully onto my comfortable bed at the guesthouse.

WEST HIGHLAND WAY

↑ A signpost marking the West Highland Way

Day 4

78km to destination

Normally, a good night's rest is all that's required to get my feet back in walking form. However, 34 kilometres in one day, on rough terrain, was pushing the limits of 'normal'. I hit the trail the following morning conscious of the whiff of Deep Heat that swaddled me as I walked past ponies (apparently 'diabetic and not to be fed'), sheep and cows of various denominations.

Pathways bursting with bushes of golden cinquefoils led the way to a historical section of the trail—one that had been

↖ A dreamy sunset at Drymen

blessed and bloodied in turns, as it witnessed the unfolding of medieval history. Most significantly, it was the site of the Battle of Dalrigh in which Robert the Bruce, the heroic King of Scots, was defeated by Clan MacDougall. His sword is believed to still lie buried somewhere in the area.

At the village of Tyndrum, over a slice of rainbow cake, I caught up with some walkers I had exchanged pleasantries with earlier in the day. From there on, for a few kilometres, the path hugged the railway line before making its way to the village of Bridge of Orchy.

Warm smiles and a warmer room awaited me at the quaint two-room B&B. Later that evening, I had the best dinner of the walk at the village's only hotel. While waiting for the trout and lentils to arrive at the table, I flipped through a whisky magazine lying around and brought myself up to speed on 'underrated Indian whiskies'.

THE ROD AND REEL
OPEN ALL DAY
AND
ALL YEAR ROUND

↓ Valley view below the mountains of Glencoe, Lochaber

↑ A charming old pub on the route

↗ The famed Highland cow breed

Day 5

57km to destination

With the longest day of walking looming ahead, I binged on a full Scottish breakfast and packed enough snacks and sandwiches to see me through.

A good part of the day's walk was by the vast Rannoch Moor, one of the big guns of the highlands. The expansive moor with its varied topography, along with the majestic Glen Coe that I was to encounter later in the day, were considered to be the highlights of the WHW.

The saturnine Scottish weather, unfortunately, chose this day to reveal its true colours.

Out came the rain gear, along with a slew of expletives. Around lunchtime, I dragged my bedraggled self to the restaurant of the King's Hotel. My sullen mien prompted the kind waiter to waive the 'no outside food' policy, and he let me have my soggy sandwiches in peace.

Meanwhile, the rain had picked up momentum. A solitary deer wandered aimlessly in the hotel's enclosure. I trudged along, the mighty Glen Coe rising by my side but, sadly, shrouded from view by rain clouds. I didn't have the luxury of dwelling on disappointment, for my mind was bracing itself for the malevolent sounding Devil's Staircase just around the corner.

The 9km zig-zag track of the 'staircase' steadily climbs to an altitude of 1,800 feet before meandering towards the town of Kinlochleven. Despite its formidable reputation, on a fine day, I wouldn't have classified this section as difficult. However, today, with the lashing rain rendering the visibility poor, the path slippery and the track deserted, the fun element was missing.

My disquiet, however, peaked at the summit. Way markers which had been consistent all along were now completely absent. There were two paths ahead of me—one going straight and another turning off to the right. I whipped out my phone for assistance, but there wasn't even the hint of a signal. I applied the universal logic of 'go straight unless otherwise indicated' only to end up yanking my foot out of a nasty bog minutes later. Having course corrected, I continued walking. However, there was still no sign of anyone else.

I shut out the gnawing feeling that I might be getting more and more lost by singing out aloud, while the more practical part of my brain furiously worked out the technicalities of smoke signals. Two hours and some later, I finally saw a fellow human. A jaunty young girl walking towards me without a care in the world, camping gear in tow. I was on the right path, indeed.

It was still some distance to Kinlochleven though, and the sodden shoes didn't help. But, hours later, having deposited my dripping gear in the drying room of my B&B and indulged in some creature comforts, the only feeling that lingered was one of satisfaction at having clocked 35 kilometres in such inclement weather.

By night, I had stepped into that familiar end-of-trip reflective space. If the Camino had camaraderie at its heart, the WHW had been about getting away and just letting go—two learnings which would prove valuable in the cataclysmic new world order that waited in the wings.

Day 6

22km to destination

It was a befitting final day, with a little bit of everything.

A steep uphill climb brought me to a pass with magnificent views towards Loch Leven. Startled sheep scuttled away, as walkers converged on the old military road cutting through the pass. This gave way to a long stretch through forestry. Wildflowers sprung out defiantly, even as parts of the forest floor lay coppiced.

By mid-afternoon, I could discern Ben Nevis in the distance. The sight of Britain's highest mountain signalled that my destination was not far now. A winding descent through Glen Nevis later, I was on the outskirts of Fort William. In the town, people went about their business, inured to the walkers marching towards the Sore Feet statue that marked the official end of the WHW trail.

As I clicked the customary end-of-hike pics, there was no commemorative certificate or celebratory high-fiving. For a hike that was crammed with many highs, the West Highland Way had a disarmingly low-key aura about it.

That's pretty much how I reminisce about the walk too—eschewing the superlative-ridden hyperbole for an uncomplicated comforting memory. A memory that I'll probably keep snuggling back into for a long time, even after the world has healed, even after the next big hike has come and gone.

Manjula Kalliat's Instagram handle is @theuniversaladaptor

eat

TRAVEL ONE BITE AT A TIME

ALKA JENA'S CULINARY ADVENTURE 62

•

SAVYA RASA 63

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY THE LODHI

BEST ITALIAN IN TOWN

DELHI

Perbacco's new menu will transport you right back to Italy

Adriano Baldassarre, the Michelin-starred maverick chef from Rome, was in town earlier this year to launch the summer menu of Perbacco, the fine-dining Italian restaurant at The Lodhi. Perbacco's cheery interiors are the perfect foil to Baldassarre's light and inventive menu which blew me away.

Among the plethora of dishes I got to sample over a leisurely tasting, two stunning antipasti stood out: the mushroom with hints of black garlic, almond and thyme (it also happens to be Chef Baldassarre's favourite dish on the new summer menu) and the beetroot-cured salmon, served with dill-infused crème fraiche and topped off with salmon roe. The presentation was deceptively simple but I could tell that a lot of thought and creative energy had gone into it.

Among the pastas (all fresh and handmade), there is a moreish ricotta and spinach agnolotti. The asparagus risotto on the menu is worth keeping an eye out for as well. In the mains (or *portata principale*, as they like to call it here), the roasted Chilean sea bass is simply sublime.

The chef—who is unapologetic about his standards ("We don't do pink sauce here")—assured me that, while all the dishes were original, traditional dishes like eggplant parmigiana and the caprese were as authentic as they come. Of course, there's the chef's touch and much freshness in the presentation, but the soul of the dish is intact.

For dessert, you cannot go wrong with the tiramisu. Quite possibly, it's the best you would have ever tasted. But I'd suggest you step out of your comfort zone and try the Delizia Al Limone, a legendary dessert from the Amalfi Coast, which also features on the menu. Last, but not least, a double-shot of espresso. We're in Delhi's best Italian restaurant after all.

» Perbacco, the Italian restaurant at The Lodhi, New Delhi, is open daily for dinner, 7-11.30pm

—AMIT DIXIT

Alka Jena's
amazing food journey

ILLUSTRATION: RAJESH KG

A senior bureaucrat by day and magical chef and food stylist after hours, Alka's story is an inspiring one

» How did you get into cooking and food styling?

I was fascinated with cooking since my schooldays but never entered the kitchen before marriage. A bad phase in my personal life after marriage took a toll on my mental health and I withdrew into a shell, but one thing that remained constant was my passion for cooking. I find a strange connection with ingredients, vegetables and everything associated with cooking. What was mundane for others became my mode of survival. After coming out of depression, I wasted no time in chronicling those recipes digitally, thus beginning my accidental journey in food blogging in 2014.

I am a self-taught photographer and food stylist who strongly believes "we eat through our eyes". This pushed me into understanding food styling through books, workshop and a lot of practice.

» You are a senior government official. How did your interest in cooking turn professional?

I adorn the role of a government official by morning and culinary custodian by evening—a role in which I discover stories, curate recipes, get intimate with ingredients and cook and photograph flourishingly. I have been working passionately to digitally document the cuisine of Odisha. While doing so I got an invitation to curate an Odisha-inspired menu for The Bombay Canteen in 2019, which gave wings to my cooking in a professional direction. Since then, I have curated theme-based popups and shared my knowledge with brands and companies in developing recipes .

» Why is Odia food so little known?

Odia cuisine has definitely missed the limelight it deserves. It was always handed down from mother to daughter at home and these recipes have remained within the hands of the female folk. As there were no written rules, each family had their own way of cooking best suited to their taste. Without proper documentation, most restaurants find it difficult to follow Odia home recipes. In a nutshell, lack of patronage, utilisation of local food as a catalyst for local pride, Odia restaurants outside Odisha are some of the reasons Odia food is not known outside the state.

—AMIT DIXIT

» What was your recent popup at Novotel New Delhi Aerocity like?

It was an experience in itself. Matching up to the palate of North Indians was a challenge as they are meat lovers and Odia cooking techniques are quite different. Most Odia food is boiled or steamed and then cooked, because boiled food absorbs less oil while cooking, making it non-acidic and easy to digest. We carefully chose recipes which would highlight our heritage as well as the cuisine's healthy aspect. Most diners were surprised by the spread of the thalis which had dishes from all corners of the state thereby presenting a flavour profile they would not have tasted before.

↑ The Odia thali that Alka Jena curated with Madhulika Dash at Novotel had more than a few surprises in store

CHEF RECOMMENDS

ALKA'S FAVOURITE ODIA DISHES

Habisa Dalma

A no-onion-garlic dalma made with mung dal and minimal spices in the month of Kartik

Chenapoda

The showstopper dessert of Odisha, where home-made cheese called *chena* is kneaded along with semolina, cardamom powder and sugar, wrapped in sal leaves and baked to perfection

Santula

A unique dish prepared with low oil and fresh, seasonal vegetables. It's easy to digest, and can be enjoyed even by sick people

SOUTHERN SIZZLE

THE COMPLETE WORKS

DIDN'T YOU ALWAYS THINK you impressed one and all with your knowledge of appam and kadala curry when it came to South Indian food, when others were still ordering idli, dosa and sambar for breakfast, lunch and dinner? Well, you'll be damned if you just casually sauntered into Savya Rasa at the very glitzy DLF Avenue in Delhi.

We speak from experience. A while ago, team *OT* was treated to a mind-boggling medley of ingredients, cooking styles and recipes from southern India at this upmarket restaurant with remarkable attention to detail in its curation of recipes, décor, and tableware.

We started with some palate-cleansing vetiver water, and topped it up with delish cooler options: the rasatini, rose milk, nannari sherbet (I picked the vasantha neer, a refreshing mix of mint, lime and honey), in a tantalising meeting of traditional ingredients and beverage-making. Up next, the Mutton Nenju-elumbu Rasam really fired up our appetites. I, a lemon rice eater, was blown away by the Vetrilai Poondu Sadam, a garlic rice recipe from the time of the Cheras. We loved the ever-so-light Elaneer Pudding, a delightful dessert from Thannur (Moplah cuisine). The street-cart delicacy Rameshwaram Pocket Rice was reminiscent of Nasi Goreng, we thought. Karnataka *oota* lovers will like the flavourful Bisi Bele Baath, as did we.

These folks have travelled the length and breadth of the southern states to come up with selections that you actually cannot get at many places in Delhi NCR. There are the fluffiest bun parottas, hors d'oeuvres like Pacha Masala Meen Fry, and Kongu Mutton Biriyani, a preparation that is savoured in Coimbatore, Salem and Erode. Finish with a tumbler of classic filter kaapi or Sulaimani—paan lovers can make one for themselves with ingredients right out of a traditional chellam.

—PRANNAY PATHAK

*For those having to choose from the starters, go for the Paneer Ghee Roast, a Mangalore special, and Chutney Paniyaram

Savya Rasa

NEW DELHI

» Commons, DLF Avenue, Saket

← Beetroot pachadi is a regular Onam *sadya* fixture but if you ever wondered where to get it in the city, they do a pretty mean one with a teeny hint of sweetness, just like it is done in Kerala

stay

HOTELS, HOSTELS AND NOTHING LIKE HOME

HOTEL SHANGRI-LA, SANTA MONICA 66

•

AYISHA MANZIL, THALASSERY 67

PLAZA SUMMER Finally!

NYC is gearing up for travellers ahead of what is expected to be a busy summer

☒ **NEW YORK**

Looking forward to restoring life to pre-pandemic times, New York City is gearing up for a busy summer season ahead. Towards the second half of the last month, most parts of the city reopened with residents gravitating back to the streets.

Jumping on to the normalcy bandwagon, amid all others is NYC's iconic Plaza Hotel, which reopened on May 20 and threw open an invitation to travellers to visit the city again. The hotel, located on 5th Avenue and overlooking the Central Park, first opened in 1907 and since then has never been completely shut for such a long duration.

With heightened precautions and housekeeping services, the hotel reopened with 20% occupancy and now has sanitisation booths at short intervals. Guests also have options for contactless check-in and in-suite testing, if the next leg of their journey requires it. The Guerlain Spa can also be accessed with a prior reservation and the fitness centre will allow guests as long as physical distancing is maintained.

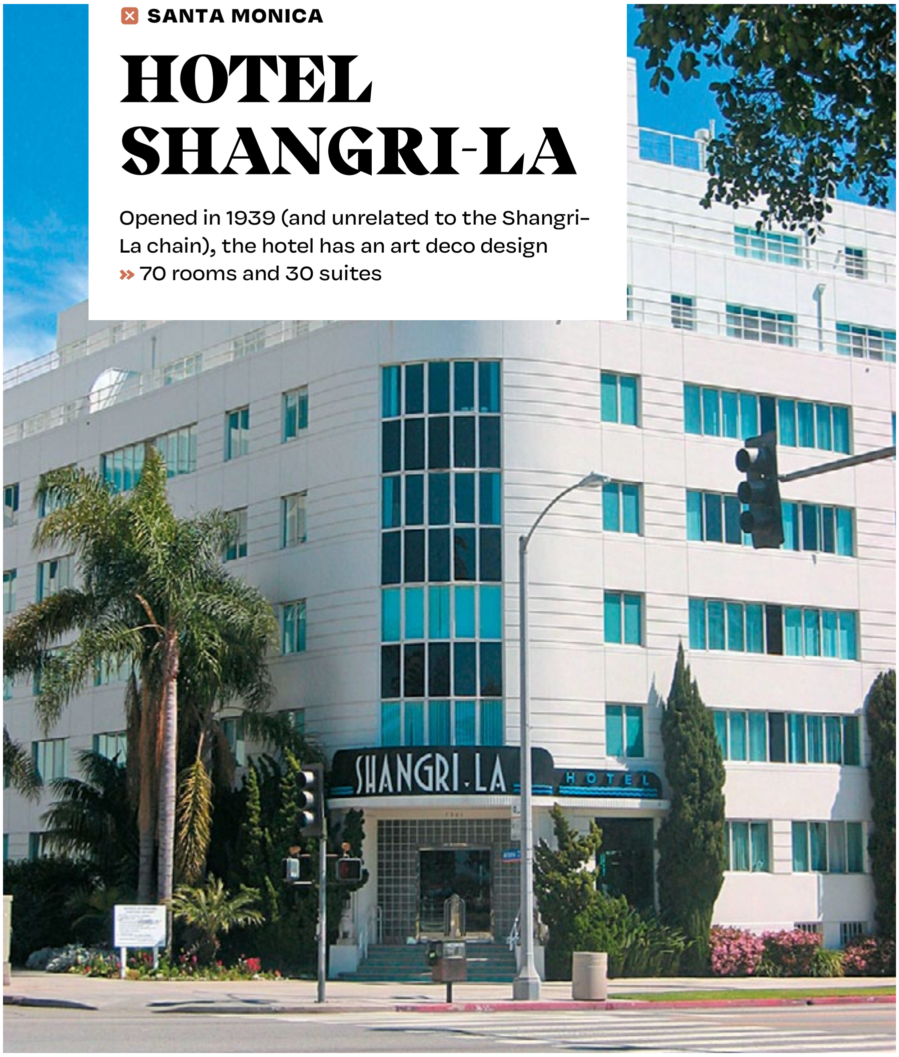
Apart from throwing its majestic doors open to travellers, the hotel also welcomed back patrons to enjoy their cherished afternoon tea at the sought-after Palm Court restaurant.

*** Beginning June 1, the hotel has also done away with the room occupancy tax, making the tariff more budget-friendly. Under its Pet Program, the hotel is permitting your furry friends with an additional fee to the room charge**

☒ **SANTA MONICA**

HOTEL SHANGRI-LA

Opened in 1939 (and unrelated to the Shangri-La chain), the hotel has an art deco design
» 70 rooms and 30 suites



THE BUZZ » Walking distance from the lively and historic Santa Monica Pier, the hotel offers stunning views of the Pacific Ocean as well as downtown. Onyx, the rooftop bar—currently shut owing to Covid restrictions—is a highlight of the property

WATER THERAPY » Emulating a luxury ocean liner's first-class staterooms, the rooms and suites have been appointed in a lavish maritime style. From luxury beds and bedding to L'Occitane toiletries, deep-soaking tubs and Frette robes, it's sheer indulgence.

MEET AND GREET » Every Wednesday, from 5pm to 7pm, the hotel invites in-house guests to mingle with some complimentary beer, wine and cheese

Escape

The Topanga State Park—currently closed because of the coronavirus pandemic—is just 10 miles from the hotel and offers some amazing walking trails

THALASSERY

Classy Bed and Board

AYISHA MANZIL

Lying on a clifftop with dreamy views of the Arabian Sea—and a swimming pool at hand—this two-storey, colonial bungalow is a dream holiday home. It was built by Murdoch Brown, an East India Company tradesman, in 1862. In 1900, the property was purchased by T.M. Moosa, the grandfather of the current owner, C.F. Moosa. Much of the original furniture and architecture has been lovingly retained and Moosa runs it as an elegant homestay. But truth be told, this homestay is less heritage, more hearth. The Moosas are legendary in the kitchen department and have single-handedly popularised Moplah cuisine around the world.

THINGS TO DO The idea at Ayisha Manzil is to, well, do nothing at all, but if you really, really want to do something, the best idea would be to sign up for a cooking class or two with Moosa and his wife, Fiza. Moosa also takes guests fish shopping in the morning.

Escape

The impressive Thalassery Fort—built by the French in the early-18th century—lies on a series of low hills leading down to the sea and is worth a dekko.

PHOTOGRAPH: AMIT DIXIT

back

LITTLE THINGS TO FILL IN YOUR JOURNEY

— BOOKS —

A Short History of Humanity

Reconstructing early migration of man

Travel Guide

Tracing the story of the Golconda Kingdom

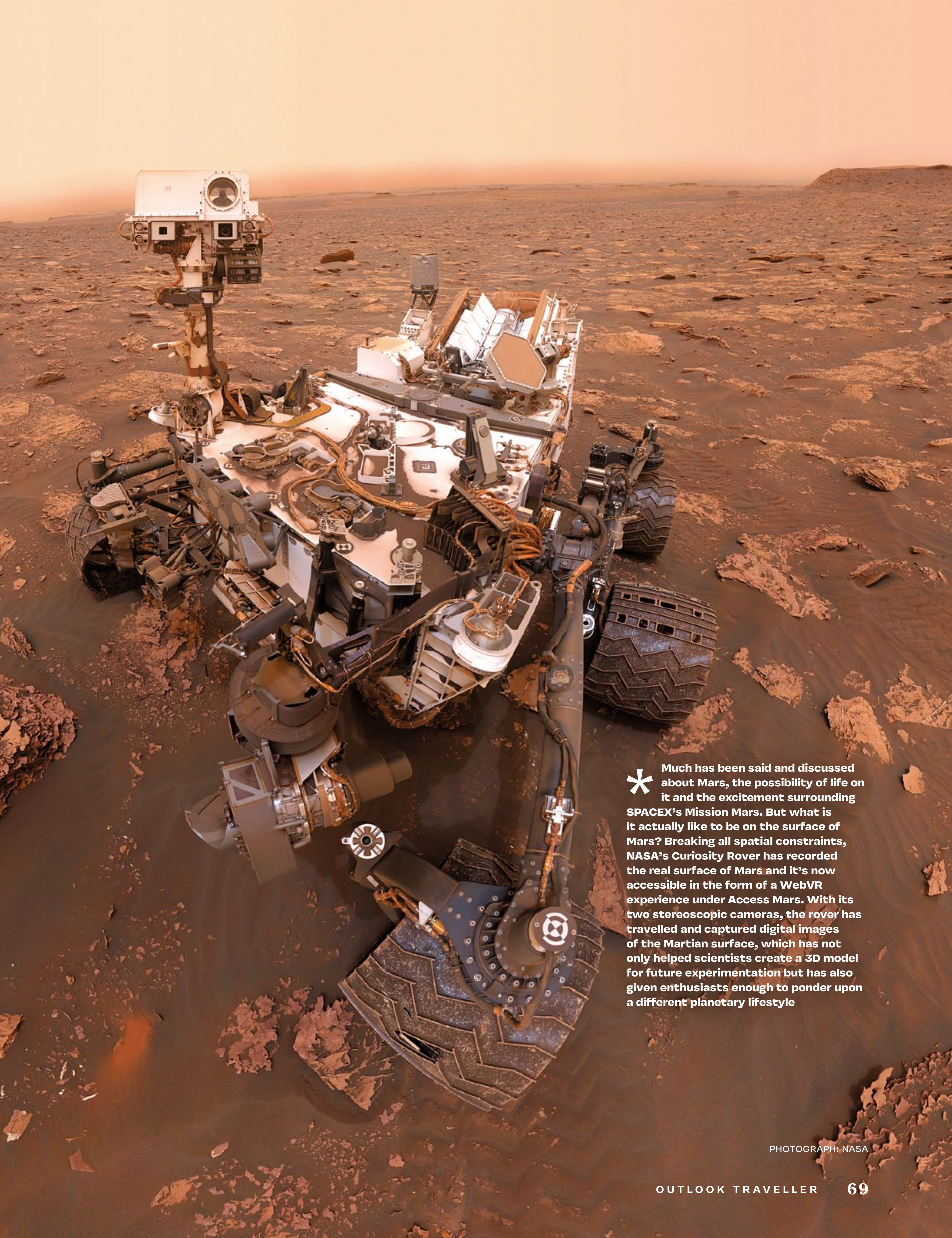
The Forest Beneath the Mountains

The complex history of the tribes in Assam

— GEAR —

Scrub facewash, laptop bag and hemp masks

The monthly roundup

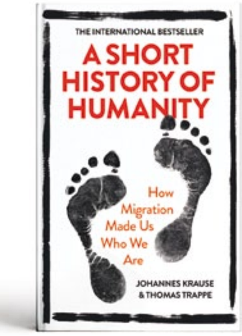


*** Much has been said and discussed about Mars, the possibility of life on it and the excitement surrounding SPACEX's Mission Mars. But what is it actually like to be on the surface of Mars? Breaking all spatial constraints, NASA's Curiosity Rover has recorded the real surface of Mars and it's now accessible in the form of a WebVR experience under Access Mars. With its two stereoscopic cameras, the rover has travelled and captured digital images of the Martian surface, which has not only helped scientists create a 3D model for future experimentation but has also given enthusiasts enough to ponder upon a different planetary lifestyle**

PHOTOGRAPH: NASA

BOOK REVIEWS
70

The Tantalising Tale of Man


THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER
A SHORT HISTORY OF HUMANITY
How Migration Made Us Who We Are
JOHANNES KRAUSE & THOMAS TRAPPE

A SHORT HISTORY OF HUMANITY: HOW MIGRATION MADE US WHO WE ARE

by **JOHANNES KRAUSE & THOMAS TRAPPE**

WH ALLEN ₹799

THIS BOOK RELIES for its startling insights on archaeogenetics, a relatively new field which is revolutionising archaeology in the same way radio-carbon dating did at one point.

Archaeogenetics is basically the study of ancient DNA using a variety of molecular genetic methods and DNA resources. The genetic analysis can be applied to human, animal as well as plant specimens, and the DNA may be extracted from a variety of fossilised specimens. These include bones, eggshells and tissues preserved through artificial means. In the case of plants, the DNA usually comes from seeds and tissue. The genetic evidence thus gathered can throw light on animal and plant evolution, domestication events and, of course, the migrations of ancient populations. Archaeogenetics can even help decode the DNA of ancient pathogens.

The authors come with strong credentials. Johannes Krause is director of the archaeogenetics department at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, while Thomas Trappe is one of Germany's leading health journalists. Trappe has reported on Krause's research on a number of occasions, having followed his work for several years.

The book begins in 2009 with a 70,000-year-old severed finger lying on Johannes Krause's desk which had been found in Siberia. From there on, it's something of a whodunit, reconstructing the history of humanity and throwing new light on the early migration of man—busting a few myths along the way. There are all sorts of interesting nuggets including on the sex life of our ancestors (they weren't averse to mating with other homonins, for one).

The book has all sorts of interesting nuggets, and occasionally makes for dense reading, but it is a seminal book which will likely pioneer more ground-breaking research in the future

The text occasionally makes for dense reading, but this is a complex subject and the authors have made every attempt to keep the material accessible. *A Short History of Humanity* is a seminal book which will likely pioneer more ground-breaking research in the future.

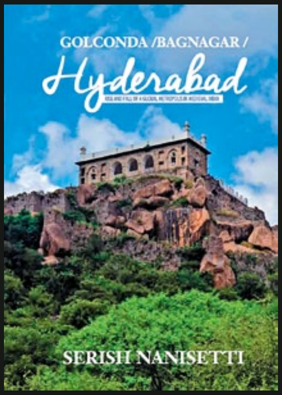
—AMIT DIXIT

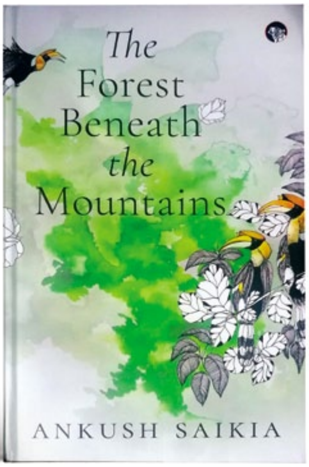
Golconda Bagnagar Hyderabad

by **SERISH NANISETTI**

This far-from-boring history of the Golconda Sultanate begins with this line: "More than 60 years after he picked up a clump of wet black clay on the western shore of India and swore he would unfurl the banner of Shiahism in India, Sultan Quli's body lay in the middle of the *hammam*." The book traces the story of the Golconda Kingdom from the time of its inception in 1518 till Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's conquest of it in 1687, answering a lot of interesting questions on the way. Who gifted the future Kohinoor to Shah Jahan, for instance, or how did Machilipatnam acquire its name? Or which fruit in Telugu has the older name of Jakarta? Sultan Quli Qutb-ul-Mulk, the first ruler of Golconda, transformed the modest fortress into a diamond mart, which became the kingdom's calling card. Eighty years later, another city was born on the banks of the Musi River—Hyderabad—which went on to become the pre-eminent city of the pre-industrial world. Remarkably, this is a self-published labour of love, down to the small note on the typeface (it's Janson, in case you wanted to know). Here's everything you wanted to know about the Qutb Shahi dynasty but didn't know who to ask.

» SELF-PUBLISHED ₹799





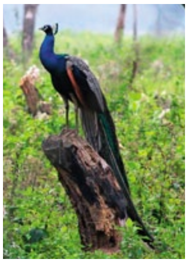
The Forest Beneath the Mountains

by **ANKUSH SAIKIA**
SPEAKING TIGER ₹499

ABHIJIT HAS LOST BOTH his parents and is at a loss despite having embarked on a career in publishing. His father, Khagen, died a long time ago and was apparently killed by insurgents in the forests of Assam where he was a beat officer. With his mother's death Abhijit feels the need to wander the forests in the foothills of Assam and discover what really happened to his father. With its insurgency and difficult terrain the Northeast is the perfect place for stories about disappearances, encounters and quests for truth—Sumana Roy's *Missing* comes to mind. The author has to date written thrillers and now combines the mystery of disappearance with the environmental worries of deforestation.

The sense of loss makes Abhijit a wanderer thumbing through the memories of his last time with his father in the beat office and his father's friends who were all illegal hunters. Many things were allowed in those good old days before his father vanished and now those laxities have led to the disappearance of trees and heightened man-animal conflicts. Marauding bands of elephants vie for terror with insurgents.

There are descriptions of hacked tree stumps, barren lands and tinshack villages with suspicious inhabitants springing up to replace the green dense jungles where animals roamed freely. But the issue goes beyond an environmental crisis in the making.



Abhijit finds himself torn between past and present and a brush with insurgency puts him into the hands of the police commandos and the army as well. This is juxtaposed by plots and counterplots as people play hide and seek with the authorities and each other while Abhijit wanders through the forests of his mind. There is a sense of alienation about him since he cannot achieve closure but continues to track down those who may have known his father and whatever information they can share with him. This leads him into occasional indiscretions and risks—apart from the dead trunks of trees there are bodies, the fallout of a spy versus spy game that is underway. Despite the threatened danger, Abhijit finds that he is getting more and more careless about keeping in contact with those relatives he has in Assam, toys with spies and counter spies and manages to betray those who try to help him, fuelled by alcohol and ego.

The book focusses mainly on descriptions of the landscape and the complex history of the Ahoms, Bodos and other tribes, the different communities all jostling for space and overlapping the borders of comfort

While the book is about Abhijit, Saikia focusses mainly on descriptions of the landscape and the complex history of the Ahoms, Bodos and other tribes, the different communities all jostling for space and overlapping the borders of comfort. Snippets of the various kinds of folk lifestyles, costumes and bits of language are thrown in so that outsiders reading the book will realise that the Bodos and the Assamese do not speak the same dialect. Sometimes the story is held up as Saikia attempts to induct the reader into the vast wealth of confusion and environmental crisis that passing time and politics have created for modern Assam.

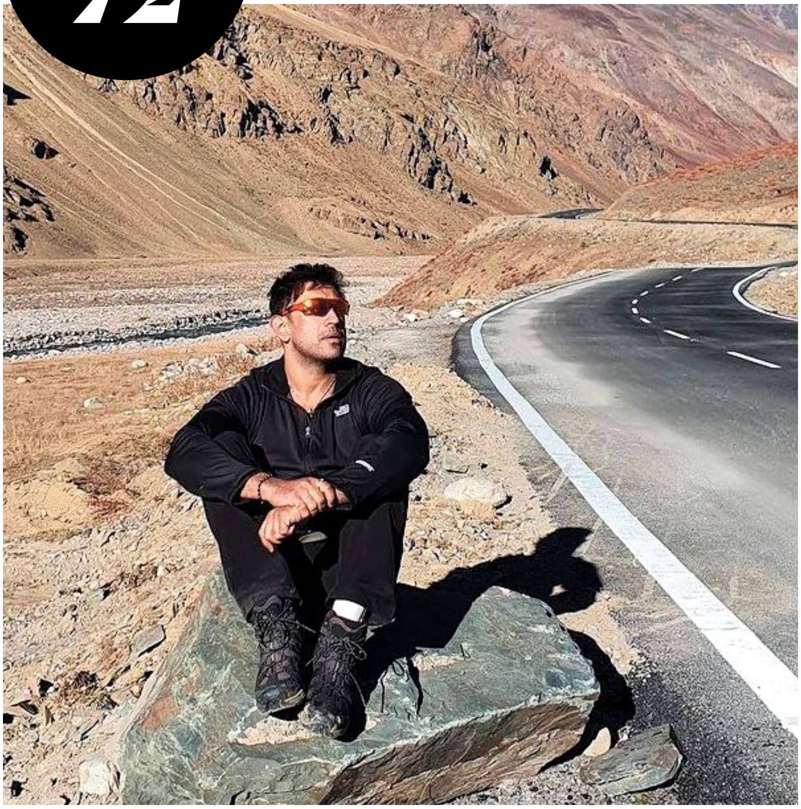
Ultimately, for Abhijit there is a kind of closure. The same cannot be said for the land that he leaves behind him.

—ANJANA BASU

FELLOW TRAVELLER

72

Amit Sadh's love for mean machines and travelling as a way of life



> **"I grew up around mountains and, for me, they are one of the wonders of the world. You have to visit them just to understand how incredible they are"**

» Tell us about your love for riding. Any favourite bikes?
It's what I do to relax, unwind and take my mind off things. It helps me get out of character after a movie or series. Biking allows me to just be myself again, connect with great souls and passionate riders from across the world.

» Where do you head to for adventure activities in India?
Usually the mountains. They're my go to place. The east (Sikkim, Shillong, Gangtok, Tawang, Mirik) is on my mind these days.

» What was it like travelling during a pandemic?
A little different, with all the social-distancing measures in place. But you definitely appreciate it more when you've not been allowed to travel for so long. It really makes you open your eyes and you take in a lot more. You spend more time looking up than down at your phone.

> **"Fitness is a lifestyle choice for me. I always find a way to get some sort of fitness activity during my trips. Be it sit-ups, push-ups or going for a run"**

» What are the lessons that travelling has taught you?
Experiencing different cultures. I like to learn about the country, the way of living and I take all the good bits and incorporate them into my life. I also love meeting people from all walks of life and talking to them.

» What's your favourite travel destination in India and around the globe?
Dubai has grown on me. New York and London are places where I have a lot of memories. But I love any place where you can head for an offroad adventure. As for India, just pick your bags and witness the vast richness of culture, people and changing regions. It's what makes it my favourite place to travel.

—**KARAN KAUSHIK**

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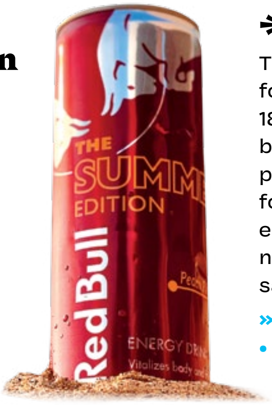

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Suited for everyday gentle exfoliation, this scrub face wash improves blood circulation, hydrates and helps in oil balancing. Scrawsh contains certified natural aloe vera extract, organic bamboo scrub, natural betaine, allantoin, bergamot oil, and spearmint oil.

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Along with a padded and quilted 14-inch laptop compartment, this RFID-safe leather bag comes with a cable organiser, a slip-in compartment and a zippered, external compartment and is available in 3 colours.

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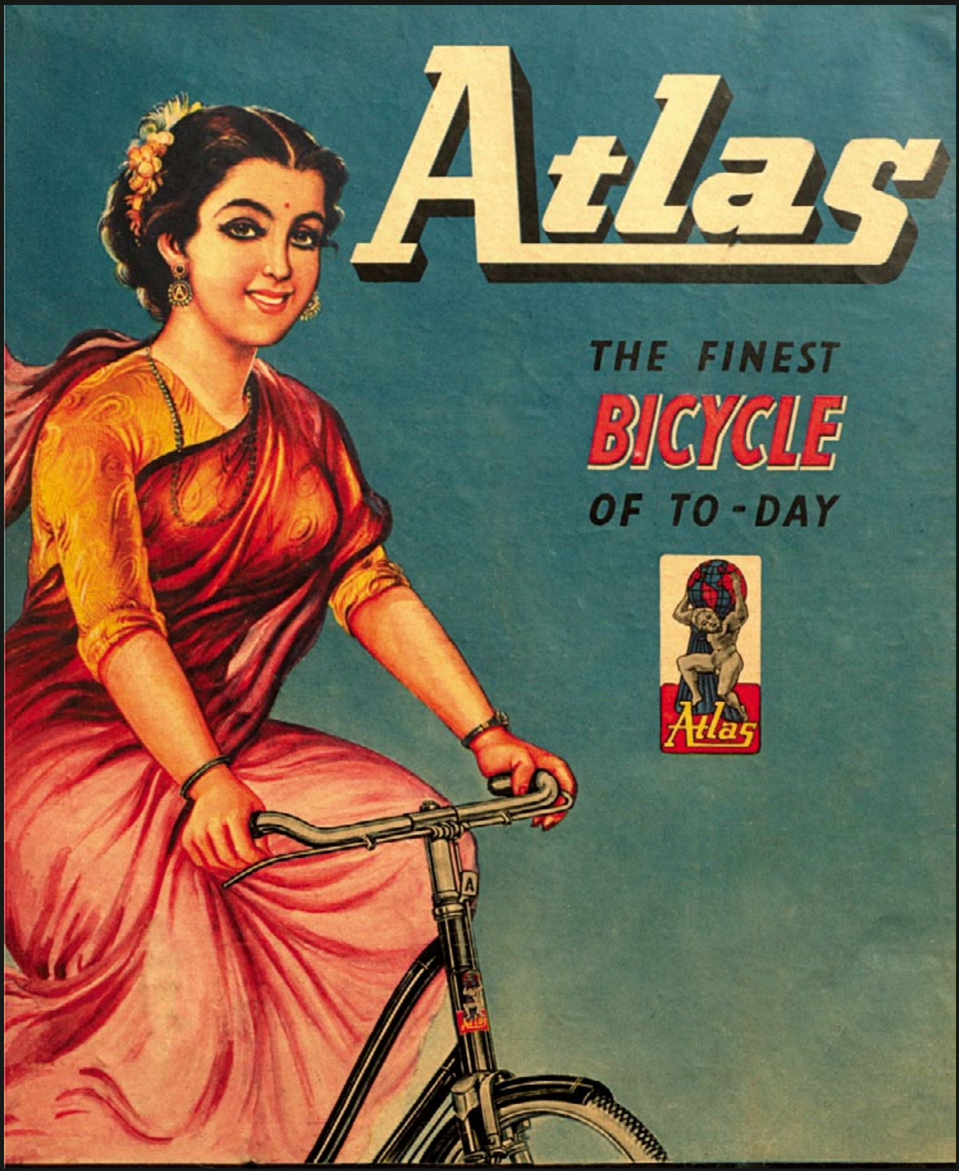

Sonepat 1973

Different things signify different emotions and zeitgeists in different eras. Who would have ever thought a bicycle could be solely a thing of beauty? They're a handy mode of transport and even cargo, a steady companion for adventurers, and an indispensable form of existing in the outdoors—for the Dutch, for instance.

The presence of women in vintage cycle posters, especially that of India's first brand to sell them—the iconic Atlas Cycles, which tragically shut shop on World Bicycle Day last year—is hardly inconspicuous. Many of them have women dressed in saris and salwar-kameez, either pedalling away or posing fashionably with them, with the customary twinkle in their eye—a twinkle that may or may not have something to do with the message of women's empowerment.

One recalls wiry men wheeling purely utilitarian bicycles with curved handlebars to work and back on roads across India, and on the other, aspirational poster girls like the one above, treating the graceful beast as an adornment that would refine one's persona, much like an iPhone or the Arc de Triomphe itself.

The cycle is a celebrity here, and this is an aspirational frame right out of the Instagram mould. With the swift, attractive and beautiful Atlas cycle, it was easy to be an influencer back in the day, perhaps.

—PRANNAY PATHAK

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